

Committee: Standards
Date: 19 November 2001
Subject: New Warding Arrangements for the Borough of Eastbourne - Polling District and Polling Place Proposals
Report of: Head of Democratic Services

Wards: All

Purpose: To frame recommendations to Full Council to provide for new polling districts and location of polling places.

Recommendations That the Council be recommended to agree that:-
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1. That the polling districts and provisional polling places shown in appendix 1 be approved.
2. That the Electoral Registration Officer be given delegated authority to make minor adjustments to the polling district boundaries necessary following the Secretary of State's final decision and otherwise as may be necessary to implement the new warding arrangements.
3. That the Electoral Registration Officer be given delegated authority to determine the final arrangements for polling places in respect of any future election or referendum based upon the provisional arrangements approved above and subject to prior liaison with Party Agents.
4. To note the implementation and publicity arrangements.

Contact: David Robinson, Member Services Manager.
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Tel: 01323 415003 or internally on extension 5003.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Local Government Commission have now submitted their final proposals to the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) for new warding arrangements for the Borough. These will provide for nine new wards to replace the existing ten. The Secretary of State will not make his decision before 16

November – the last date for representations. It is likely that the formalisation of the decision, which will be by way of an Order laid before Parliament, will not take place until December or early in the New Year.

1.2 It remains the Council's intention to implement the new wards for the 2 May 2002 elections. A detailed briefing note was issued to Councillors and Party Agents early in October and this included a detailed implementation timetable. A revised copy of this timetable is shown at appendix 3. Key to this is the need to start work on reconfiguring the electoral roll database to take account of the new wards and polling districts by the end of November or early December at the very latest.

2.0 Legal Duty

2.1 Section 18 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 places a duty on the relevant council to divide a parliamentary constituency into polling districts and to keep the districts under review. In a shire county such as East Sussex the duty lies with the district (or borough council). Section 31 similarly deals with elections for a local council placing the duty on a county council for county elections and the district council for district elections. It is also the Council's duty to designate polling places for the polling districts and to keep them under review.

2.2 Councils must exercise their powers with a view to giving all electors reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances. The Council is required, so far as is reasonable and practicable, to designate as polling places only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled. Accordingly, a Council should not designate as a polling place a building if the only means of access is by means of steps, when another more suitable building is available in the polling district. However, a building would not be a more suitable polling place, if it is so far removed from most of the electors in the polling district as to be inconvenient for them to reach it. In special circumstances the designated polling place may be outside the polling district.

3.0 Proposals

3.1 Initial proposals for polling districts and polling places were given in the consultation document dated 26 October 2001 sent to Party Agents, Borough and Eastbourne County Councillors.

3.2 The optimum arrangement for each of the new wards would be to have 3 polling districts of equal electorates and with a suitable venue centrally located as the polling station. However, the following factors will inhibit such an arrangement:-

- The need to retain all the existing county division boundaries for the time being.

- The absence of a suitable polling station venue (or in some instances any venue) on some parts of the town.
- A wish to avoid voters having to cross busy roads unless there are adequate crossings.
- Other geographical/location/access factors.

4.0 Agent Liaison Meeting

- 4.1 A meeting with local Party Agents was arranged for Tuesday 13 November 2001 to consider the proposals. The following were present:

Councillor Beryl Healy, on behalf of Liberal Democrat Party Agent
 Councillor Mark Neeham, Conservative Party Agent
 Jonathan Pettigrew, Labour Party Agent

5.0 Comments Received

- 5.1 Specific comments received from Councillors and otherwise made at the Agent Liaison Meeting are summarised in appendix 2 to this report.

- 5.2 In general it should be noted that the Agents endorsed the proposals now put forward to this Committee. Exceptions to this endorsement are either listed in the appendix where they relate to specific proposals or were in respect of general concerns and these are discussed below.

- 5.3 There was a reservation concerning the application of a norm of 3 polling stations per ward. Agents considered that this could be seen as unduly restrictive. My response to this is to say that where a case can be made for additional stations this has been provided for. In the case of both Old Town and Ratton more station than 3 stations are proposed. Another general comment was a wish that, so far as is possible, electors should continue to vote at their usual station. There was a worry that people could be less inclined to vote if the venue changed. This concern is acknowledged, however the changes in ward boundaries will inevitably mean changes for some people and an over-riding objective must be to make the best use of the limited availability of suitable venues. The importance of advance publicity in this respect is acknowledged.

6.0 Revised Proposals

- 6.1 In the light of the comments received a summary of the revised proposals is given in appendix 1 to this report. It should be noted that there is a greater number of polling districts than there are polling places. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, the need to retain the existing county electoral division boundaries just in case there is a by-election between now and 2005 when the county's new electoral arrangements will be implemented (see para. 9 below); and second, to

retain flexibility pending final agreement on polling places.

7.0 Delegation Arrangements

7.1 As the Order giving effect to the new nine wards has not yet been made the Council will need to agree appropriate delegation arrangements for the Electoral Registration Officer to implement the Order, when made, in accordance with the Council's wishes. Account will also need to be taken of any modifications to the Commission's recommendations within such delegation.

7.2 Although polling districts should be agreed at this stage, if only to allow the process of re-configuring the electoral roll to commence, the decision in respect of polling places should be made on a provisional basis only. Certain venues will need to be formally approached and flexibility retained, especially as changes may be needed at short notice to take account of venues that may suddenly become unavailable for whatever reason.

7.3 It is also important, that in the run up to an election, the Council does not allow itself to be open to any criticism that polling places are being determined following pressure from any individual Councillor or group of Councillors. For this reason a delegation to the Electoral Registration Officer is appropriate. Liaison must however take place with Party Agents in good time. It is suggested that such liaison be initiated not less than three months prior to the date of an election for which the date is fixed in advance and for any other election or referendum at the earliest opportunity.

8.0 Further Consultations

8.1 Once these proposals have been agreed further consultation will be undertaken with Party Agents on the final polling place arrangements as indicated in 7.3 above. In addition advice will be sought from the Council's Access Officer regarding suitability of polling station venues and scope for temporary or permanent adaptations and liaison undertaken with the Eastbourne Access Group.

9.0 Electoral Review of East Sussex County Council

9.1 It should also be noted that this whole process of defining polling districts will have to be repeated in two years time to implement the outcome of the Local Government Commission's review of the County Council's electoral arrangements. It is unfortunate that the reviews of both districts and county were not done at the same time. The Commission, however, for their own reasons refused to do this. Consequently much of the research work and consultation will have to be updated and repeated. Electorate projections to 2007 will be required.

9.2 It is also considered unlikely that following the review Eastbourne will have 9 county councillors to match the nine new borough wards.

Taking the Commission's 2005 estimates, the average ward electorate of Eastbourne's 9 wards is 8,137. The estimated county electorate in 2005 totals 396,398. If this total is divided by the current number of county councillors (44) the average number of electors per councillor is 9,009 - significantly above the Eastbourne average figure. For Eastbourne to have 9 councillors the number of county councillors would need to be nearer a total of 49. It is most unlikely that the Commission will agree to such an increase in the total - even if this was proposed by the County. What seems more likely is that Eastbourne will have either 7 or 8 county councillors.

10.0 Publicity

10.1 The following matters will need to be publicised:-

- That elections will be held on 2 May for 27 Councillors in 9 Wards.
- That voters will be choosing three Councillors in each Ward on this occasion and not the usual one.
- That voters may find they have been allocated a different polling station and are in a differently named Ward from that which they were used to.
- The procedures for getting on to the electoral roll in time for the elections and the relevant deadline for claims.
- The arrangements for applying for a postal and proxy vote and the relevant application deadlines.
- Procedures for standing for election and the closing date for candidate's nominations.

10.2 The different means for getting the above messages out will and/or could include:-

- Public Notice (a statutory requirement in the case of the revised electoral roll).
- Press Releases, including local radio and interviews.
- Paid-for advertising.
- Articles in the Council's "Eastbourne Review" circulated to all households with the Advertiser.
- Leaflets and posters in public offices, community centres, doctors' surgeries etc.
- Letter/leaflet to all households.
- Large size poll card (containing additional information over and

above that required by law).

10.3 Detailed examination of the above methods and costs will be undertaken in due course with a view to drawing up a cost effective strategy. Assistance and advice will be sought from the Council's Press Office.

10.4 There is no specific budget provision for such a campaign and therefore any additional costs will need to be contained within existing departmental budgets. However, many of the publicity methods identified above have little or no additional cost with the exception of paid for advertising/notices and a letter or leaflet to all households. My initial view is that the core objectives of a publicity campaign can be met without the need to spend a lot of money. For example, the additional cost of a larger size poll card will be marginal and since the Council has a legal duty to send out poll cards this is an expense to which we are already committed.

11.0 Implications

11.1 Staffing implications were described in some detail in the briefing note referred to in 1.2 above. Costs will need to be accommodated within existing budgets.

Peter Finnis
Head of Democratic Services

Background papers used in compiling this report:

- (1) Final recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for Eastbourne. Published by the Local Government Commission for England, August 2001.
- (2) Briefing note for Councillors and Party Agents, 3 October 2001.
- (3) Delineation of revised polling districts and identification on polling stations - draft proposals for consultation, 26 October 2001.

To see or obtain copies of the papers please refer to contact officer as named above at the Town Hall, Grove Road, Eastbourne BN21 4UG. Telephone details as given above. E mail councillors@eastbourne.gov.uk.

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