

Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2024
Acting Returning Officer's recommendations for that part of the Brentwood & Ongar Parliamentary Constituency that falls within the Borough of Brentwood

Introduction

This review is a statutory requirement relating to the polling districts and polling places within the Parliamentary Constituency. It is being undertaken in advance of the implementation of the revised Essex County Council division arrangements which will take effect in May 2025.

The elections on 2 May 2024 were the first held under the revised schedule of polling districts, polling places and polling stations adopted by the Council in December 2023.

The combined all-out borough and PFCC elections in May presented a range of challenges, including use of new polling station premises and the reallocation of voters due to ward and polling district boundary changes.

Electors were given advance notice of polling station changes in January 2024. In addition to information on poll cards, external redirection signage was provided on the day at polling stations to remind electors of the alterations.

Overall, the polling stations functioned satisfactorily and very few issues were identified. The subsequent UK Parliamentary in July 2024 demonstrated that the new arrangements had sufficient capacity to deal with the higher electoral turnout. These elections have therefore provided a robust test of the electoral arrangements within the Brentwood Borough.

The Elections Act 2022 introduced new requirements and duties in 2023 which affect how polling stations function. The most notable change has been the introduction of Voter ID requirements, necessitating new checking processes at the polling station and completion of statistical returns to central government. Arrangements have also been made at polling stations for privacy areas and availability of female staff should face coverings need to be removed. Although some polling stations can make use of a separate room for this purpose, privacy screens are being provided where this is not the case.

In addition, the Elections Act 2022 introduced new duties relating to disabled access. There is a requirement for Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide equipment to support disabled voters to vote independently and in secret at the polling station, and in doing so to have regard to any relevant guidance issued by the Electoral Commission. Appropriate arrangements have been made and this issue will be kept under review.

As the electoral arrangements have worked well within the Brentwood area, there is no necessity to amend the existing schedule of polling districts and polling places, other than where it is affected by ECC division boundary changes. The proposed schedule of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations would allow for the minor adjustments to accommodate the new Essex County Council divisions in advance of the 2025 ECC elections.

When designating polling districts, the council has a duty to seek to ensure that all the electors in the constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances. In addition, and unless there are special circumstances that lead the council to determine otherwise, each parish must be in a separate polling district.

The polling place for a polling district must be within the area of the district unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area either wholly or partly outside of the polling district. The polling place must also be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the polling district how they will be able to reach their designated polling station.

It is the statutory responsibility of the Returning Officer for the particular election to provide a sufficient number of polling stations and allot the electors to those polling stations in such manner as he or she thinks the most convenient.

Comments on the Proposals under the 2024 review

Brentwood South ward

Adjustments were made to the CQ Queens Road polling district at the last review to accommodate the additional electors in the ward from the north side of the High Street. The Cathedral Large Hall provided extra capacity and operated successfully as a double station.

It was anticipated that the Essex County division boundary would be realigned to coincide with the new Borough ward boundary, but this has not occurred. Instead, approximately 355 properties (425 electors) within this ward will continue to form part of the Brentwood North Division.

In order to facilitate this, a separate polling district is required for the electors affected. In practical terms, this will only be evident at the time of ECC elections when a separate 'polling station' within the Cathedral Hall will be provided for voters in CQA Queens Road (Brentwood North Division).

The proposal is therefore supported.

Hutton South

With the inclusion of the Three Arches and Thrift Park areas within the new Hutton South ward, Members took the opportunity at the 2023 review to reallocate part of the former Thriftwood electorate to a more convenient polling station at St Stephen's Church. This move appears to have gone smoothly for electors.

However, the original proposals for the whole of the Hutton South ward to be included within a new Brentwood Hutton County Division, has now been reversed. Instead, the existing boundary between Brentwood Hutton and the Brentwood South Divisions is due to be retained, cutting across the JQ Thrift Park polling district. Approximately 285 properties (485 electors) are affected.

In order to facilitate this, a separate polling district is required for the electors affected. In practical terms, this will only be evident at the time of ECC elections when a separate 'polling station' within St Stephen's Church will be provided for voters in JQA Thrift Park (Brentwood Hutton Division).

The proposal is therefore supported.

Shenfield

There are no changes proposed for this ward. The electorate currently votes at Shenfield Parish Hall, which operates well as a triple station. A view will be formed regarding a return to Shenfield Library once that development is complete.

However, it should be noted that the organisers at Shenfield Parish Hall have indicated that they would expect the polling station to return to Shenfield Library once that facility becomes available.

No adverse comments.

Conclusion

Overall, the Proposed Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places (September 2024) is supported for the reasons given above.

The proposals provide for 38 venues with a total of 50 polling stations within the Brentwood Borough, all having electorates within Electoral Commission guidelines. Due to the non-alignment of borough ward and county divisions, the total number of polling stations would increase to 52 whenever an ECC election were held.

It is recommended that electors continue to vote at their existing polling station locations. This is important to minimise disruption for electors and to allow staff attention to be focused on voting arrangements. The formalisation of the two additional polling districts is necessary for the proper conduct of the Essex County Council elections.

Communication to electors in advance of the elections, and increased signage on polling day in those areas affected by changes, will support the delivery of successful elections.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Stephenson', followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Jonathan Stephenson
Acting Returning Officer
3 October 2024