1. **Summary**

1.1 To report the outcome of a light touch review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2015.

2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

2.1 That the General Assembly of the Council notes the outcome of the light touch review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2015.

2.2 That the change of polling place in Greenhithe Polling District to a 250 metre radial geographical area from the Dance Union Studio, North Star Boulevard, Greenhithe be agreed.

3. **Background and Discussion**

3.1 The Representation of the People Act 1983 places a duty on the Council to divide the borough into polling districts for the purposes of parliamentary elections and to designate a polling place for each district and to keep these arrangements under review.

3.2 Under the provisions of Section 17 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 local authorities were required to “carry out and complete” reviews of polling districts and polling places within 16 months of 1st October 2013 and then in the period of 16 months beginning with the 1st of October every 5th year thereafter. In fulfilment of this duty Dartford carried out a full review of its polling districts and polling places in 2014. The outcome of this was reported to the General Assembly of the Council on 6 October 2014. The full statutory review involved consultation with the Returning Officer, political parties, local organisations, stakeholders and the public.

3.3 The outcome of the review was that there were no changes to the existing locations of any of the polling places or polling districts but the definition of each permanent polling place was broadened to comprise of a geographical zone within 250 metres of the normal polling station location. This was to allow the Returning Officer sufficient flexibility to use an alternative room or building in the vicinity of the normal polling station should that not be available for any election without having to seek the approval of the GAC. It was however noted that whilst no polling station had more than the 2,500 electors upper limit recommended by the Electoral Commission allocated to it at that time (taking postal voters into account), the scale of development in the Borough would eventually result in the need for change.
3.4 Although a full review is only required to be carried out every five years a review can be carried out at any time and it is the Council’s practice to undertake a light touch review annually to identify any changes that may be required. The outcome of the annual review for 2015 is reported below.

3.5 The outcome of this review is normally reported to the Electoral Provisions Sub-committee prior to consideration by the GAC. The review has been delayed this year partly due to a request to all authorities from the Boundary Commission for England not to make any changes to electoral areas between 7 May and 1st December 2015 (to assist with their preparations for conducting the Parliamentary constituencies review from 2016), and as a result of contact from the Local Government Boundary Commission which could result in a fundamental review of current electoral and warding arrangements in the Borough. The review has concluded that it would be better to keep change to the minimum at this point to avoid further voter confusion when more fundamental change has to be implemented but is also recommending a minor, short term change to polling arrangements in Greenhithe Polling District which requires the approval of the GAC and which cannot wait for the next normal scheduled meeting of the Council in March 2016.

4. The Annual Review 2015

4.1 The designation of polling districts and polling places is the responsibility of the local authority, however, the locations and provision of polling stations remains the responsibility of the Returning Officer.

4.2 The difference between a polling district, a polling place and a polling station is outlined below:

A polling district is a geographical sub-division of an electoral area, i.e. a UK Parliamentary constituency, a European Parliamentary electoral region, a ward or an electoral division.

A polling place is a geographical area in which a polling station is located.

However, as there is no legal definition of what a polling place is, the geographical area could be defined as tightly as a particular building or as widely as the entire polling district. Any changes to the location of a polling place, however minor, require the approval of the General Assembly of the Council. This is the reason for the decision arising from the statutory review in 2014 to designate each polling place as a geographical zone of 250 metres from the current location of each permanent polling station.
The polling place for each temporary mobile polling station is defined as being a location within the polling district, so providing greater flexibility. This is necessary as a temporary station is only used in polling districts where no suitable building is available and if the current location were to be unavailable due to roadworks or for any other reasons the options available for alternative siting are often very limited.

A polling station is the actual room/area where the process of voting takes place, and must be located within the polling place designated for the particular polling district.

4.3 Given that a full review was carried out last year the focus of this light-touch review has been on whether any changes are required and whether there have been any developments or demographic changes which have impacted on the designated polling districts or polling places since that time. It has also drawn upon the experiences of the Combined elections on 7 May 2015 and feedback from Presiding Officers and electoral staff.

4.4 Wherever possible the designated polling places are locations which have suitable buildings available for use as polling stations, ideally public or community use buildings. However where this is not the case, temporary portacabin units are used. Whilst these are far from ideal they represent a practical solution to the need to provide a polling station at a suitable location in each polling district. Hiring these temporary stations is much more expensive than hire charges for permanent polling stations and they tend to attract some complaints as they are sited along the highway or on adjoining land. There are currently 9 temporary polling stations in Dartford and if any new buildings became available in the polling districts concerned it would be advantageous for them to be considered for use.

4.5 A small number of complaints were received regarding the use of temporary polling stations at the Combined elections in May. Only three complaints related to the siting of the units. One complaint was received about the mobile unit stationed at Redding Close (AC – Darenth Park). This proved however to be concern from a local resident that the placement of the unit would impact on the ability of permit holders to park in the controlled parking zone introduced since the previous elections. This was not the case and reassurance was provided. The remaining two complaints related to the mobile unit stationed on the amenity area opposite Betsham House (IB – Southfleet West) and related to the positioning of the unit which they claimed impeded the sight of line at the junction of Park Corner Road and Betsham Road for drivers wishing to turn left at the crossroad towards Southfleet station. The siting of this unit previously generated a strong complaint from the occupier of a neighbouring building who had claimed that the unit had been insensitively positioned facing her house and had been unnecessarily obtrusive at the European elections. As a result the position of the unit had been altered and action taken to ameliorate the impact thereby avoiding a repetition of
that particular complaint. The Deputy Returning Officer visited the site and concluded that the new alignment did impact on the sightline in the approach to the junction but not at the junction itself and that the position was acceptable. It should be possible to revisit the alignment to try and minimise this further for future elections.

4.6 Since the statutory review in 2014, Dartford has successfully undertaken possibly the largest and most complex election on record. The elections on 7th May saw the combination of the Parliamentary, Borough and Parish Council elections for the first time. Turnout for local elections tends to be in the region of 35-45% but because of the combination with the Parliamentary elections, which have a much higher turnout, the turnout across all of the elections was around 70%. 37 polling stations had combined Parliamentary and Borough Council elections whilst 16 stations also had Parish Council elections in addition. Each elector was therefore being given two or three ballot papers to complete and instructions on how to complete the ballot papers and how many candidates they could vote for in each case. This meant that the time to issue, complete and place the ballot papers in the respective ballot boxes was much longer than is usually the case. When combined with very high turnout this resulted in queues developing at a number of polling stations, most notably at Wentworth Junior School (EC- Wentworth), Darenth Hall (AB-Green Street Green, AD-Ladywood, AE-Lane End), the Royal British Legion Club (DB-Knockhall) and, in particular, at the temporary polling station at Eagles Road car park (DA-Greenhithe).

4.7 There were also small queues at other polling stations at different times on election day, which was not unexpected given the number of ballot papers to be issued and the very high turnout across all of the elections. Staff had been trained on how to manage queues if they developed and in most cases were able to deal with this without any major issues. The public were generally understanding and patient. It is difficult to see how this could have been avoided and venues such as Wentworth Junior School, Darenth Hall and Joydens Wood Community Centre are spacious venues with good facilities and were fully staffed yet still experienced long queues. This was simply unprecedented and there is nothing to indicate that any of these locations are in anyway unsuitable for use as polling stations or that the number of electors eligible to vote at these stations is excessive. Nor is it likely that other combined elections in the foreseeable future will generate the levels of turnout and complexity to generate queues to the same degree.

4.8 The increasing number of residents in Greenhithe and Ingress Park does however call the long term viability of the current polling arrangements into question. The Sub-committee did consider a recommendation by the Returning Officer in 2013 to replace the temporary polling station at Eagles Road, Greenhithe with a permanent polling station in the Dance Union Studio, at Unit 1 North Star Boulevarde. This which would have had much better facilities for staff and voters, and would have been able to accommodate queues much better than the more cramped temporary unit and would have had
enough space for the Returning Officer to deploy additional staff to alleviate queuing. However the Sub-committee did not want to move the location, albeit only a short distance of under 100m, because it felt that a new location might prove confusing for electors. Likewise queues developed at the Royal British Legion Club and it is clear that the polling facilities are under pressure as the number of voters in Greenhithe and Ingress Park continues to grow. Identifying a location for an additional polling place in Ingress Park has proved problematic but this would provide a solution whereby an additional polling district would be created and the Greenhithe and Knockhall polling districts would be redrawn. The difficulty has been in finding a suitable polling place in Ingress Park as there is no good location to place a temporary station and expectations are that when the new Community Centre finally becomes available this would be the most suitable location. It is proposed to review the situation when the Community Centre opens but this is unlikely to be in time for the next scheduled elections on 5 May 2016.

4.9 Whilst it is unlikely that the same problems will be experienced at the next scheduled elections, the Police and Crime Commission elections on 5 May 2016, where turnout is likely to be much lower, the number of electors using the mobile polling station at Eagles Road now exceeds the 2,500 upper figure recommended by the Electoral Commission. Pending the division of the polling district when the Community Centre becomes available a temporary solution could be to “split” the register at the polling station and to deploy additional staff at the polling place. This would not be possible using a single mobile unit at Eagles Road car park. Either an additional mobile unit would need to be placed in the car park, taking up more parking spaces and at an additional cost of over £4,000, or the polling station could be relocated to the Dance Union Studio as previously proposed. The Dance Union Studio has good facilities and is large enough to accommodate the additional staff and equipment arising from “splitting” the station into two. A move to the Studio would alleviate any remote chance of significant queues developing as there would be more space for voters and more staff on hand to deal with electors. The Dance Studio would also be much cheaper to hire for the day and would keep Eagles Road car park available for parking.

4.10 With the exception of the proposals for Greenhithe outlined in paragraph 4.9 above it is proposed to retain all other polling arrangements in the short term. It is likely that the Local Government Boundary Commission may require the Council to conduct a review of its arrangements to ensure consistency of representation across all Council wards and if this happens this could result in major changes to electoral arrangements. The Local Government Boundary Commission wrote to the Returning/Registration Officer on 21 May 2015 regarding possible imbalances in the ratio of electors to Councillors in some wards and the Returning Officer/Registration Officer has provided the information requested by the Boundary Commission. The Council is waiting to see whether the Commission will ask for a review to be carried out. This would be a major piece of work with possibly wide
ranging implications and changes to current arrangements. Any changes before the Commission has decided whether or not to hold a review could therefore be counterproductive and confusing for electors.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The General Assembly of the Council is requested to note the outcome of the light touch review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2015 and the recommendation to designate the polling place for Greenhithe polling district as a 250m geographical zone from the position of the Dance Union Studio. No other changes are recommended at this time.

The need for change in the future is recognised given the scale and pace of development within the Borough but this would be picked up as part of any boundary review being required by the Local Government Boundary Commission.

6. Relationship to the Corporate Plan

Not applicable.

7. Financial, legal, staffing and other administrative implications and risk assessments

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<th>Financial Implications</th>
<th>None,</th>
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<td>Legal Implications</td>
<td>None. There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report. The change of polling arrangements for Greenhithe to a permanent building with good facilities and access should benefit disabled or infirm voters.</td>
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<td>Staffing Implications</td>
<td>None.</td>
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<td>Administrative Implications</td>
<td>None.</td>
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<td>Risk Assessment</td>
<td>There are no additional risks arising from this report.</td>
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8. Appendices

None

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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<th>Report Author</th>
<th>Section and Directorate</th>
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<td>Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places Report to the GAC in October 2014</td>
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<td>A Twyman</td>
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