

ELECTORAL WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 18 SEPTEMBER 2014 at 5pm

Present: Councillor R Chambers – Chairman.
Councillors J Davey, E Hicks, J Ketteridge and J Rose.

Officers in attendance: J Mitchell (Chief Executive), P Snow (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager) and R Dobson (Principal Democratic Services Officer).

EWG6 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dean and Lemon.

EWG7 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 August 2014 were received and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

EWG8 PROPOSED SCHEME FOR STAGE TWO CONSULTATION

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said a number of representations had been received in response to the first stage of the consultation on a draft polling scheme. He invited Members to consider the comments where these related to proposed changes. He advised the impact of current or ongoing development should be taken into account, but with regard to future development, further review would be necessary at a later stage.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager highlighted the fact that a number of responses related to Little Dunmow, some of which recommended returning to use of the Fitch of Bacon Public House as the polling building rather than the Community Hall at the Recreation Ground. The reasons for considering the public house less satisfactory were based on the lack of a proper car park and concerns about the privacy of the area screened off for polling, which was the restaurant area of the public bar. However the Recreation Ground was further from the centre of the village and along an unlit lane. The two buildings would be the subject of a site visit with the Access Officer, Sue Locke to assess the location, facilities and access to these buildings, and a report on those visits would be brought to Members.

Councillor Davey asked about alternative polling buildings in Little Dunmow. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said St Mary's Church had been assessed some years ago, and whilst it was more central, the Community Room had at the time seemed more suitable. However, the Church could be included in the schedule of site visits in order to carry out a review of its suitability for use as a polling building.

Members considered maps showing areas of current and potential new developments in relation to possible new polling district boundaries within wards.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager referred to specific buildings to be assessed in site visits:

Great Dunmow

- The United Reformed Church in New Street, Great Dunmow

Representations had been received after the European Parliamentary Election from an elector who was a wheelchair user, regarding difficulties she had experienced in accessing the building. A report on this building would be brought to the next meeting.

- The Reid Rooms, Margaret Roding

There was no designated building at present, due to the fact that in the recent past The Reid Rooms had not always been available as they were used for weddings. The Church had once been used, as had a building which was part of The Reid Rooms' stable block. An assessment of The Reid Rooms would be carried out including discussions with the owner regarding availability.

Saffron Walden

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said all Saffron Walden wards were affected by the ward boundary changes following last year's review of the Council's electoral arrangements. In addition to the ward boundary changes, there were development sites to be taken into account.

Members considered the map provided, and commented as follows.

Audley Ward

Members were reminded that although the Friends' School was used as the polling place for Audley Ward, it was located in Shire Ward. On two occasions the Council had had to use a mobile unit at the School. The polling building had in the past been The Assembly Room, but unfortunately that building was not always available as it was used by the school for examinations. For the most recent election, the European Parliamentary Election, the Council had used the car park near the Sports Hall to site a mobile unit.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said the School had indicated it would be willing to allow its car park to be used for a mobile unit for future elections. However, for an expected high turnout election the use of a mobile unit was not acceptable.

Alternative polling places for Audley Ward which could be assessed were the Council Offices or Saffron Walden County High School ("SWCHS").

Members commented on the fact that for most voters SWCHS was at quite some distance.

The possibility of using the Sports Hall rather than the Assembly Rooms at the Friends' School was put forward. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said he would explore that possibility with the School. If the Friends' School were to be used, it should be on the basis that a secure guarantee should be given that a particular building would be permanently available.

It was agreed to include in the site visits the above locations.

Shire Ward

The number of electors for Shire North was approaching the acceptable limit of 3000. Members considered the following buildings:

Golden Acre Community Centre/Katherine Semar School

The polling district required a building which would accommodate two polling stations. An assessment some years ago had concluded the internal dimensions were of limited size, therefore a visit to both the above buildings would be carried out to compare the two sites.

R A Butler School

The electorate served by the R A Butler School was increasing from 2000, and whilst the room used at the School was adequate for a small election, it was not suitable for a parliamentary election. The question of whether the Hall could be used, which would mean closing the School, would be addressed with the school authorities.

Thomas More School

Members noted the facilities had been assessed in the past, and were not considered particularly good.

Four Acres

The Common Room was agreed to be too small to accommodate properly the two polling stations which were required for the number of electors.

Members noted there were few options other than schools for use as polling stations.

Councillor Ketteridge said where polling stations were located in the centre of Saffron Walden in streets where traffic wardens patrolled, measures to plan for electors' parking should be considered and shared with the parking partnership to minimise difficulties on polling day.

In response to a member question about statutory powers regarding polling station sites, the Democratic and Electoral Services Officer said the Returning

Officer's powers enabled the use of publicly maintained buildings, including academies, free of charge other than costs such as heating. The powers did not therefore apply to private schools such as the Friends' or Dame Bradbury schools.

Councillor Ketteridge asked whether the Council Offices could be used for polling.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Officer said the Staff Room had previously been used but it had drawbacks in that the internal room space was restricted by pillars which made it difficult to set out the room in a suitable way for a double polling station. The projected turnout of 70% for the forthcoming election and the fact that it was a combined poll meant great care was needed to ensure there were adequate suitable buildings available.

Stansted Mountfitchet

The Democratic and Electoral Services Officer highlighted the changes made during the electoral boundaries review.

St Mary's Primary School, Forest Hall Park

The new building for St Mary's would be assessed by undertaking a site visit.

Great Dunmow

Members considered the impact on the polling districts in the area of Great Dunmow. The Democratic and Electoral Services Officer reported that the parish council for Little Easton had requested a community governance review to consider the parish boundaries in respect of the sector 4 development. A further potential development site of 600-700 houses west of the by-pass was currently the subject of an appeal. Members agreed any governance review should be deferred until the outcome of the appeal was known.

It was agreed to proceed with the consultation on the basis that Members would evaluate polling places in light of the further information reported from the site visits.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Officer outlined the next steps, which were to write to consultees under the second stage of the consultation; to undertake site visits to existing or prospective polling stations in order to assess their suitability for use, and to then prepare a polling scheme which would incorporate further proposals for members to consider. An extraordinary meeting of Council would be called on 11 November in order to receive the Working Group's recommendations.

EWG9

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be at 5pm on 28 October 2014. The meeting ended at 5.45pm.