

Committee:	Finance and Administration	Agenda Item
Date:	15 November 2007	7
Title:	Review of Polling Districts and Places	
Author:	Peter Snow, Electoral Services Officer, 01799 510431	Item for decision

Summary

The Council is required, under Section 18C of the Representation of the People Act 1983, to complete a review of its polling districts and polling places within 12 months of the date on which Section 16 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 came into force, and every four years thereafter. The relevant date for completion of the review is the end of 2007. To enable any changes in electoral arrangements to be reflected in the revised register of electors published on 30 November 2007, the review must be completed by no later than mid November, and will take effect on the day of publication.

This report contains recommendations from each of the three Area Panels. Great Dunmow Town Council has been asked to comment on the proposed changes insofar as they affect Great Dunmow and any comments received will be reported. The Committee is requested to approve a revised scheme of polling arrangements covering the entire district.

Recommendations

That the Committee approves and adopts a suitable scheme of polling districts and places, reflecting the recommendations contained in this report.

Background Papers

Polling District Review file, including responses to the public consultation, other background papers, and relevant maps.

The schedule of existing arrangements dated 1 December 2006, and associated maps and other material.

Impact

Communication/Consultation	The Returning Officer of the Parliamentary constituency, the Member of Parliament for Saffron Walden, Essex County Council and county councillors within Uttlesford, district councillors, parish councils, members of the public and any other interested party to
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	the review.
Community Safety	No specific impact.
Equalities	Consultation with Uttlesford Access Group on behalf of electors with a disability.
Finance	No financial implication beyond the requirement to meet necessary hire costs of buildings used for polling purposes.
Human Rights	No specific implications.
Legal implications	The need to ensure the Council complies with statutory obligations as described in the report.
Sustainability	Not directly applicable.
Ward-specific impacts	All wards.
Workforce/Workplace	No specific impact except where indicated.

Situation

- 1 Section 18 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA) places a duty on district councils to divide their area into polling districts, to designate a polling place for each polling district, and to keep them under review. This duty applies for the purpose of Parliamentary elections but the RPA also allows a county or district council to divide an area for the election of its councillors. In practice, the arrangements for all types of election are generally identical and the scheme is set accordingly.
- 2 Members may recall that a full review was carried out last year. This was to enable fresh arrangements to be put in place for the local elections in May 2007. It was intended that the review would not be signed off before the 2006 Act provisions came into force, so that a further review would not be required for four years. In the event, the coming into force of Section 16 was delayed and a new review was therefore commenced on 30 July 2007.
- 3 Although a full review was carried out as recently as last year, it will be seen from the report that some amendments to the scheme are being suggested and it is hoped that further changes will not be needed in the immediate future.
- 4 The rules applicable to this process are:

- a. All electors must be given such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable.
 - b. Each parish must, unless there are special circumstances, be a separate polling district.
 - c. The polling place shall be an area in the polling district, except where special circumstances make this undesirable, and shall be small enough to make it identifiable.
 - d. A polling place need not be designated if this does not materially affect the convenience of electors, but if no polling place is designated the polling district is to be taken to be the polling place.
 - e. As far as is reasonable and practicable, every polling place must be accessible to disabled electors; the authority must also have regard to the accessibility to disabled persons of potential polling stations in any polling place so designated, or any place it is reviewing.
- 5 A **polling district** (PD) is a defined geographical area that is either the same as, or a sub-division of, an electoral area (usually a parish, or where a parish is divided into more than one ward, that ward, or a sub-division of it).
- 6 A **polling place** (PP) may either be a building, a geographical area within the polling district, or the entire polling district, depending on the circumstances. It is literally the 'place' that electors must visit to record their vote.
- 7 A **polling station** is the room or specific part of a building where the poll takes place. The allocation of polling stations is at the discretion of the returning officer and therefore outside the scope of this review, but if the designated polling place is defined as a building, the polling station can only be allocated within that building.

The Consultation Process

- 8 The review commenced on 30 July 2007 and was publicised by notice at the London Road offices and on the Council's website. Letters of consultation were sent to Sir Alan Haselhurst MP, Alasdair Bovaird as Returning Officer for the Saffron Walden constituency, Essex County Council, county councillors representing Uttlesford, all district councillors in a ward representational capacity, and parish councils and parish meetings in the district.
- 9 It is now a requirement under the revised legislation to consult the relevant returning officer and, in turn, that returning officer must respond commenting specifically on all existing polling stations and any new polling stations under consideration (or any that he thinks should be considered).
- 10 A letter was also sent to the Secretary of the Uttlesford Access Group regarding the accessibility of buildings as there is a new duty on the Council to seek representations from persons having particular expertise in disabled access issues.

- 11 Accompanying the consultation letter was a copy of the notice publicising the review, together with draft proposed changes to the existing scheme (prepared by the electoral services officer), and a schedule of existing arrangements. These are all set out as appendices to this report.
- 12 Responses to the consultation were requested by 10 September 2007. Those representations received were summarised in the report submitted to each of the area panels.
- 13 The Chief Executive wrote in his capacity of Returning Officer (as he is now required to do) referring specifically to a number of matters concerning individual polling districts, places and stations. His letter is included in full as an appendix to this report.

Access Arrangements

- 14 As part of the 2006 review, arrangements were made for a survey to be carried out by the Essex Disabled People's Association (EDPA) to assess the buildings currently used against the criteria set out in paragraph 4e.
- 15 The EDPA survey identified a number of problems with some of the buildings designated as polling places, considered serious enough to place doubt on their future use. Those buildings are:
 - Ashdon Village Hall; Broxted Village Hall; Duddenhoe End Village Hall; Elmdon Village Hall; Great Canfield Church Hall; High Roding WI Hall; Little Hallingbury Village Hall; Manuden Village Hall; Newport Village Hall; Quendon and Rickling Village Hall; and Stansted Youth Centre.
- 16 Each of the management bodies concerned was asked for a response to the matters highlighted in the EDPA report. A full summary of the responses received was included in the report to the area panels. It is the officers' view that all of the access problems identified by EDPA have been, or are being, addressed, and that the buildings concerned should continue to be used, unless they can be demonstrated to be unsafe or inaccessible. It should however be noted that no response has ever been received in respect of High Roding WI Hall.
- 17 A summary of the survey findings relating to the eleven buildings listed above is set out as an appendix to this report. The full survey results can be viewed in the electoral office.
- 18 The comments of the Access Group are set out in the attached appendix and Members are asked to take these into account. Clearly, as the Council has no funds available, the only route open to the owners of these buildings is to pursue funding from other sources, such as grant funding. The option of utilising mobile Police vehicles will be examined.

The Existing Scheme and Proposals for Change

- 19 The existing scheme was approved by the Operations Committee on 28 September 2006 and came into force on 1 December. The draft proposals for change (see the attached appendix) were devised by officers and published on 30 July 2007 for the purposes of the consultation part of the review. The remainder of the report sets out the recommendations made by each of the area panels and some additional considerations in respect of Great Dunmow.

East Area Panel

- 20 **The Area Panel agreed a recommendation to divide the existing polling district of Little Dunmow into two separate polling districts of Flitch Green and Little Dunmow based on the areas of the proposed new parish of Flitch Green and the revised parish of Little Dunmow.**

- 21 **Until such time as the new parish is created, the boundaries would be defined as follows:**

Flitch Green – ‘The northern boundary to run along the edge of Oakwood Park immediately to the south of Gypsy Lane. The north-eastern boundary will follow the centre of Station Road to the point where it is crossed by Stebbing Brook; it will then follow the line of the Brook along the south-eastern boundary (coinciding, at this point, with the common boundary between Uttlesford and Chelmsford Borough). The western boundary will then follow first the nature reserve boundary, and then the development limits of Oakwood Park until it joins with the boundary at the north-western point.’ The polling place will be defined as the whole polling district, together with an area extending one mile beyond the polling district boundary. This will allow electors at Flitch Green to continue to vote at the Flitch of Bacon Public House until alternative provision can be made.

The revised Little Dunmow polling district would then consist of ‘that part of the existing parish of Little Dunmow not included in the Flitch Green polling district, polling at the Flitch of Bacon Public House.’

- 22 At the meeting, doubt was raised about the accuracy of the boundary description stating that Stebbing Brook forms the common boundary between Uttlesford and Chelmsford Borough. In fact, it is the River Chelmer that forms the common boundary for part of its length.

Therefore, for the avoidance of any doubt, it might be better to substitute the following description:

‘Flitch Green – that part of the parish of Little Dunmow commonly known as Oakwood Park and bounded by the following line: from where the parish boundary meets with Felsted on Station Road along the centre of that road in a north-westerly direction, then in a south-westerly direction along the northern boundary of Oakwood Park, immediately to the south of Gypsy Lane, then in a generally southerly direction along the western boundary of Oakwood Park to the parish boundary.’

- 23 The East Panel considered recommendations relating to **Great Dunmow North and Great Dunmow South**. The proposal was to divide both wards into two separate polling districts as follows:

‘Great Dunmow North-West: that part of Great Dunmow North ward lying to the west of a line running from the ward boundary on Stortford Road northwards along the unmarked path leading to Newton Villas then skirting round the western and then the northern edge of Newton Villas, Newton Grove, Newton Green, and Waldgrooms then proceeding in a generally northerly direction along the western boundary of the Emblems development then proceeding to the parish boundary immediately to the west of Newton Hall, polling at Great Dunmow Primary School off Woodlands Park Drive.’

The following streets will be incorporated within the polling district area: Acacia Drive, Aspen Terrace, Barberry Path, Birch Road, Cedar Close, Cherry Crescent, Chestnut View, Conifer Way, Cypress Court, Elm Road, Hazel Close, Holly Close, Holm Drive, Juniper Court, Laburnum Road, Larch Way, Laurel Drive, Maple Way, Pine Avenue, Rowan Way, Spruce Avenue, Stacey Court, Stortford Road (part – Canada Cottages only), Walnut Walk, Willow Road, Woodlands Park Drive, and Woodlands Walk.

On current figures (September 2007), there are 772 electors within the proposed polling district area.

‘Great Dunmow North-East: the remainder of Great Dunmow North ward not included in the Great Dunmow North-West polling district, polling at the Dourdan Pavilion, Recreation Ground, off The Causeway.’

It would comprise all of the streets not included within Great Dunmow North-West.

On current figures there are 1769 electors within the proposed polling district.

‘Great Dunmow South-West: that part of Great Dunmow South ward lying to the south and then south-west of a line following the centre of Stortford Road, from the ward boundary at the junction with Rosemary Lane, and then High Street and Chelmsford Road to the eastern parish boundary, polling at the United Reform Church in New Street.’

The following streets will be incorporated into the proposed polling district area:

Angel Lane, Ash Grove, Chelmsford Road (except for a small portion containing three dwellings), Chequers Lane, Clapton Hall Lane, David Wright Close, Fitzwalter Place, Haslers Lane, Heywood Lane, High Meadow, High Street (evens), Highfields, Highstile, Lower Mill Field, Lukins Drive, Manse Gardens, New Street, New Street Fields, Nursery Rise, Oliveswood Road, Ongar Road, Pharisee Green, Philpot End, South View, Springfields, Standrums, Stortford Road (odds), Upper Mill Field, and Woodview Road.

On current figures there are 1934 electors within the proposed polling district.

‘Great Dunmow South-East: the remainder of Great Dunmow South ward not included within the Great Dunmow South-West polling district, polling at E T Foakes Memorial Hall, Stortford Road.’

On current figures there are 1736 electors within the proposed polling district.

- 24 The report to the East Area Panel contained a carefully argued case to divide the existing polling districts as described above, based on population growth and the need to make convenient arrangements for electors in Great Dunmow. For further details, please refer to paragraphs 37 – 53 of the original report. In summary, the proposal is felt to be the best available solution for the following reasons:
- a) The South ward needs to be divided into two PDs now.
 - b) The North ward will need to be divided soon, possibly before the next four-yearly review is due; making the change now will enable facilities to be designated that are convenient for electors in both parts of the ward.
 - c) Each of the proposed designated polling places is located within the polling district to which they will be attached and is convenient for the majority of electors.
 - d) Polling facilities will stay the same for 56% of electors; for most of the remainder, the new facility will be physically closer than the existing.
- 25 A Member of the Panel raised doubts about the proposed split between the south-east and south-west polling districts and it was recommended that the scheme be adopted, subject to the views of Great Dunmow Town Council. A letter was sent to the Town Council on 16 October and any views received will be reported to Members.
- 26 In view of the comments expressed at the East Panel meeting, further work has been carried out on options for the division of the South ward. One option would be to divide the ward as follows: ‘Great Dunmow South-Central – that part of Great Dunmow South ward lying to the west and north of a line, starting on the ward boundary and running along the River Chelmer, then following the centre of Braintree Road to the junction with High Street/ Chelmsford Road, then following the centre of Chelmsford Road until the point where it is intersected by the southern bypass, then following the line of that road, and then the disused railway line (skirting around the southern boundary of the Round House at Buttleys Lane) to the western parish boundary.’
- 27 The GD South-East polling district would consist of the remainder of the South ward. On present figures, it is calculated that there are 1647 electors within the GD South-East PD and 2029 within GD South-Central.
- 28 Another option might be to resurrect the proposal considered at the 2002 review to separate the ward into two polling districts divided by a line drawn along the disused railway line and the southern bypass. Under this proposal,

electors south of this line would have polled at the Grove Court residential home in Nursery Rise. The division of electors under such an arrangement is calculated to be 2540 electors in GD South-Central and 1136 electors in GD South-Outer.

- 29 Neither of these options seems entirely satisfactory and, subject to the views of the Town Council, Members are requested to opt for whichever one of the options presented is considered to provide the most convenient facilities for electors in South ward. One serious disadvantage to adopting either alternative is that both proposed polling places (Foakes Hall and the URC), are located within the South-Central PD, leaving the remaining electors without a polling venue (unless Grove Court is chosen).
- 30 It is accordingly **recommended that the Committee adopts suitable arrangements to divide both Great Dunmow North and South wards into two separate polling districts.**
- 31 There were no other proposals affecting polling districts in the East Panel area, and it was **recommended that the entire scheme covering the East Panel area be adopted, incorporating any revisions agreed at this meeting, with effect from the date of publication of the revised register on 30 November 2007, and that the electoral services officer be authorised to prepare a suitable statement of reasons for decisions made as part of the review.**

North Area Panel

- 32 **The Area Panel recommended as follows:**
- 1. The existing scheme for the whole of the area covered by the North Panel be recommended for adoption, with effect from the publication of the revised register on 30 November 2007, and that the electoral services officer be authorised to prepare a suitable statement of reasons for the decisions made.**
 - 2. The Council endorse as a statement of principle the Returning Officer's remarks that the requirement to make the convenience of electors the primary consideration in conducting a review of polling arrangements may sometimes lead to the designation of school premises, especially where there is no suitable alternative.**
 - 3. A few electors at Little Walden, transferred from Little Chesterford to Saffron Walden parish, continue to poll at Little Chesterford Village Hall for district ward elections only, until such time as a consequential changes order can be made.**

South West Area Panel

- 33 **The Area Panel recommended as follows:**

1. **The Peter Kirk Centre no longer be designated as the polling place for Stansted North polling district and that the whole polling district be designated as the polling place.**
2. **The Youth Centre no longer be designated as the polling place for Stansted South polling district and that the following description be substituted: 'the whole polling district, together with a radius of ¼ mile beyond the polling district boundary, subject to any building used being included within the built up part of Stansted village'.**
- 3 **Wicken House no longer be designated as the polling place in Wicken Bonhunt and that the whole of the polling district be designated instead.**
- 4 **The following amended description be adopted as the polling district boundary for Mole Hill Green: 'that portion of the parish of Takeley lying to the east and north of a line commencing on the north-western boundary of the parish at a point due north of the Passenger Terminal at Stansted Airport, and running in a southerly direction to a point on the road from Coopers End to Takeley village just to the north of Bridgefoot Cottages, then in a north-easterly direction to the parish boundary at the point where it is crossed by the byway known as Cobbs Lane'. As before, Takeley would consist of that portion of the parish not included in the Mole Hill Green polling district.**
- 5 **The arrangements for the electors in polling districts ACA/2, ACA/3, ADC/2 and ARA/2 listed in the report be agreed, and that representations be made to Sir Alan Haselhurst MP about the unsatisfactory position relating to these electors.**
- 6 **The entire scheme covering the South-West Panel area be adopted, incorporating any revisions agreed at this meeting, with effect from the date of the publication of the revised register on 30 November 2007, and that the electoral services officer be authorised to prepare a suitable statement of reasons for decisions made as part of this review.**

General Comments by the Returning Officer

- 34 In his concluding remarks, the RO makes some general comments affecting all area panels. The first of these concerns the quality and training of polling staff. The second concerns the past reluctance of Members to designate school premises for polling use. Members will have the opportunity to read these remarks in full, in the document attached. Only the North Panel picked up the recommendation in the report. Members are now asked to decide whether they wish to endorse as a general statement of principle his comment that the law requires the Council to make the convenience of electors the primary consideration in conducting a review of polling arrangements, and this

may sometimes lead to the designation of school premises, especially where there is no suitable alternative.

Electorate projections

- 35 Although it is not a requirement to take electorate projections into account, it seems sensible to do so and, for this purpose, appendix 4 sets out the total number of expected electors as at mid 2011 when the next review will be due. There is an element of guesswork involved in producing these figures. Members should refer to the footnotes to the table for some explanation.
- 36 It will be for Members to decide how much weight they give these figures but clearly, the developments at Flitch Green, Woodlands Park, Priors Green, and Rochford Nurseries will all impact on current arrangements at some stage. Aside from the polling districts affected by these settlements, it seems that only Great Dunmow South (see comments elsewhere in this report) is likely to be unduly affected by significant electorate growth within the timeframe of this review.

Appendices:

Members are invited to refer to the following appendices for further background information to those matters discussed in the report:

Appendix 1: Public Notice of Polling District Review

Appendix 2: Draft proposed changes to the existing scheme

Appendix 3: Schedule of Polling District arrangements effective from 1 December 2006

Appendix 4: Four year electorate projections

Appendix 5: Summary of Essex Disabled People's Association survey

Appendix 6: Representations of the Returning Officer dated 5 September 2007

Appendix 7: Representations of the Uttlesford Access Group

Appendix 8: Map showing the proposed boundary between Great Dunmow North-West and Great Dunmow North-East, and polling district locations

Appendix 9: Map showing the proposed division between Great Dunmow South-West and Great Dunmow South-East, and potential polling district locations

Risk Analysis

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Not complying with statutory duty to give electors such reasonable facilities as are practicable.	Unlikely because this is a statutory process with full consultation.	Potentially serious.	Follow statutory review framework and timescales.