

APPENDIX 6

Peter Snow
Electoral Services Officer
Council Offices
London Road
Saffron Walden
CB11 4ER
5 September 2007

Dear Peter,

POLLING DISTRICT REVIEW – COMMENTS OF THE RETURNING OFFICER

I am writing in response to your letter of 30 July 2007 inviting me to comment on the review of polling districts by no later than 10 September. Under the terms of the 2006 legislation I am now required to submit representations as to the location of polling stations within all existing, or any proposed, polling places within the Saffron Walden constituency.

In framing these comments, I have had regard to the draft schedule of proposed changes to the existing scheme accompanying your letter.

My comments are as follows:

I propose to make no specific comments regarding any of the polling places within the following wards, as the present arrangements are considered to be the best that can be made for the polling districts concerned:

Ashdon, Barnston and High Easter, Broad Oak and the Hallingburys, Elsenham and Henham, Hatfield Heath, Littlebury, Newport, Saffron Walden Audley, Saffron Walden Castle, Stebbing, Stort Valley, Thaxted, The Chesterfords, The Eastons, The Rodings, The Sampfords, and Wenden Lofts.

As far as the remaining wards are concerned, I would comment as follows:

Birchanger

The development of some 600 residential units at Rochford Nurseries is about to commence. Approximately two-thirds of this site is included within Birchanger parish (the remainder being in Stansted) and the provision for new units within Birchanger is in the order of 460.

Uttlesford is already committed to a parish review to examine the boundary between Birchanger and Stansted once approximately 200 units are populated on the site and I cannot of course comment upon the likely outcome of this review.

Given that significant numbers of electors are unlikely to be resident at the Rochford site for some time to come, there is no need, in my judgement, to consider revised polling arrangements at this review. However, the matter of future provision at the Rochford site should be flagged up for consideration as and when it becomes necessary.

I understand that school and other community facilities will be sited at Rochford in the future and it seems sensible, at that time, to assess the needs of the community on the new residential site, in relation to those electors located within the well established village of Birchanger.

I therefore recommend that such an assessment be made at such time in the future as the Rochford site is sufficiently developed to justify an interim review, and that any review of parish arrangements be taken into account when such an assessment is carried out.

Clavering

It is understood that Essex County Council is proposing to close Wicken House and to declare the site surplus to requirements. I am not sure what the time scale is to implement this proposal but it appears that Wicken House may no longer be available for polling use when this happens.

I am not aware of any other suitable buildings in Wicken Bonhunt but clearly an alternative polling venue will have to be found. My recommendation is that no building is designated at present and that the polling district be designated as the polling place. This will allow me discretion to continue to use Wicken House so long as it remains available, and to make whatever arrangements are possible after that time.

I have no comments to make regarding the designated polling arrangements in Clavering parish.

Felsted

The present arrangements in Felsted East and Felsted West polling districts are considered satisfactory.

In Little Dunmow, I note the proposal to divide the existing parish into two separate polling districts based on the area of the proposed new parish of Flitch Green (the Oakwood Park development site) on the one hand, and the remainder of the established parish of Little Dunmow on the other.

I agree with this proposal for two reasons. First, it anticipates the creation of the proposed parish and will therefore obviate the need for an interim review when the order creating the new parish is made. Second, it will reflect the reality on the ground of the existence of two separate and very different communities at Oakwood Park and the village of Little Dunmow.

The disadvantage of making this change now is that no community facilities yet exist at Oakwood Park, although I understand that a primary school is in the process of construction and will potentially be available for polling use in the near future. In the absence of other community facilities, it is sensible that the school should be earmarked for this purpose although it would not be good practice to designate this building until the school authorities can be formally consulted. I therefore recommend the adoption of the proposal.

At Little Dunmow, I consider the Flitch of Bacon Public House to be less than ideal for use as a polling station but there is presently no other community building available except for the parish church.

Great Dunmow North

I agree with the proposal to recommend no change at this stage. However, the development of the Woodlands Park site continues to progress, leading ultimately to the provision of some 1450 houses. It is likely that consideration will, at some stage, have to be given to the relocation of polling facilities to the Woodlands Park site, either as an alternative to the existing polling place, or by splitting the North Ward into two separate polling districts, one based on the development site, and the other on the established town part of the ward.

The current rate of development progress indicates that there are expected to be some 500 new electors within the ward by mid-2011 (when the next polling review is due to take place). At that time there will be approximately 3000 electors within the polling district. This is felt to be close to the comfortable upper limit for the number of electors to be accommodated within a single polling district. Once the electorate increases much beyond this number it will in my view become necessary to consider an alternative arrangement.

Great Dunmow South

The present electorate of about 3,600 is already large enough in my view for the ward to be split into more than one polling district. I believe that this option was considered at a previous review but was rejected because of the lack of suitable locations for polling elsewhere in the town. I am told the option considered at that time was to locate another polling venue at Grove Court on the Nursery Rise development in the south of the town.

The projected increase of some 250 electors will bring the electorate in this polling district close to 4,000. I consider this number to be too large to fit into a single polling district as it would mean having to divide the existing polling place (the Foakes Hall) into three separate polling stations. This, in my view, would be potentially confusing and therefore unacceptable.

One immediate way to resolve this problem might be to change the polling venue for Dunmow North (see above) from the Dourdan Pavilion to the new primary school at Woodlands Park, then to designate the Foakes Hall and the Dourdan Pavilion to accommodate the electors in Dunmow South between them. This would, of course, involve finding a suitable boundary with which to divide the existing polling district. I do not presently have a suitable boundary in mind but you may be able to devise something that would work.

May I therefore recommend that an arrangement along the lines suggested above is at least considered and some thought given now to a possible boundary division?

If a change is not made now I consider it will become inevitable by the time of the next review in 2011.

Saffron Walden Shire

I have no suggestions to make regarding either Shire North or Shire South polling district. At the last review, the boundary was amended slightly to accommodate the new development on land to the east of Bell College.

The remainder of that development will increase the number of electors in Shire North to a figure that may make it necessary to accommodate two polling stations within the designated polling place (Four Acres Common Room). In my opinion, that venue is unsuited to housing a second polling station, both because it is relatively cramped for space and because there are no parking facilities associated with the building.

A better option to consider might be the RA Butler School, which I understand was used previously as a polling venue for the Shire area. However, I am not advocating the use of that building at the present time. It does seem inevitable that alternative arrangements will become necessary at some stage.

Stansted North/Stansted South

Please refer back to my comments about Birchanger regarding the impact on Stansted South of the Rochford Nurseries development.

Depending on the outcome of any review of parish arrangements, it may become necessary to relocate the polling place for Stansted South to a position closer to the centre of the majority of the resident population.

In my view, none of the polling locations in Stansted parish have been entirely satisfactory for some time.

A brief resume of the various locations that have been used may be helpful. Until 2003, Stansted was a single, three member ward and was at one time split on an east/west axis for polling purposes. The football club at Hargrave Park, the common room at Mead Court, and the day centre at Crafton Green have all, at various times, been used as the polling venue for the western half of the village. For whatever reason, none of these venues proved suitable. In contrast, the Youth Centre off Lower Street has remained as the venue for Stansted South, and before that, Stansted East.

Both of the existing designated places are satisfactory from the viewpoint of space and amenities, but neither location is in a wholly convenient position for the areas they serve. It might almost be argued that the two venues could be swapped around although this would actually make little difference.

The Youth Centre is physically remote from Stansted South polling district but does have the advantage of familiarity and continuity. It is not located within the polling district. It is a legal requirement that the polling place is within the district, unless there are special circumstances. However, the Youth Centre is within ¼ mile of the polling district boundary and this distance does not seem an unreasonable one for most electors.

However, the position of the Peter Kirk Centre, serving Stansted North, does need to be examined. It is understood that Essex County County intends, eventually, to dispose of the whole of the site incorporating both Peter Kirk and St Mary's Primary School for residential use. This is in general accordance with the Local Plan. The

school will probably be relocated to the Rochford Nurseries site and might then make a suitable venue for polling in Stansted South. Alternatively, any community facility on the new site would do just as well.

There is a current planning application to convert and extend former school buildings at the Peter Kirk site for residential use. This does not affect the building designated for polling use but clearly there are long-term implications for the whole site.

In the circumstances, I would recommend that you try to identify another building in Stansted suitable for this purpose, or suggest to the Council that the entire polling district is designated as the polling place, allowing me the flexibility to find the most suitable building at each election until the next review.

If this latter course is chosen, it might be helpful to adopt a similar approach in Stansted South as, once polling can be relocated to Rochford Nurseries, the Youth Centre could then be allocated as the polling place for Stansted North without the need for a further review to take place.

The existing polling arrangements in Ugley are not affected by any of these developments.

Takeley and the Canfields

I support the proposed minor change to the boundary between Mole Hill Green and Takeley polling districts. In the long term, I question the viability of a separate polling facility at Mole Hill Green, if the number of electors declines as a result of the impact of BAA property ownership, especially as the former village hall now acts as a drug advisory centre. In the short term, it seems the use of this facility is safe. It is also accepted that Mole Hill Green is physically remote from Takeley village centre, some three miles distant by road.

Development has now commenced at the Priors Green site, included partly in Takeley and partly in Little Canfield. The schedule of four year electorate projections accompanying the consultation papers indicates that development of the Little Canfield portion of the site will be more rapid than the Takeley portion and might result in more than 300 new electors there by mid 2011. The short term impact at Takeley is likely to be less severe by then because of the site phasing and also because the electorate there will be less unbalanced than in the smaller settlement of Little Canfield.

At the last review in 2006, Little Canfield Parish Council asked how the Council intended to deal with this influx of new electors. I do not feel that the Council can take full account of the Priors Green development until it is considerably more advanced than at present, and until some community facilities are available.

The other factor is that, as at Rochford Nurseries, Uttlesford is committed to a parish review once the site is fully occupied. The impact of such a review cannot be anticipated at this stage. In the context of this review, therefore, I recommend that arrangements at Little Canfield and Takeley remain unchanged, until and unless circumstances alter sufficiently to justify an interim review.

The arrangements at Great Canfield would be unaffected.

Wimbish and Debden

At the 2006 review, Members decided to divide the parish of Wimbish immediately into two separate units based on Carver Barracks and the village. Reports indicate that this arrangement worked well although turnout at Carver Barracks was very low (19.5% as compared to 51.6% at Wimbish village).

Although officers felt this arrangement was premature in 2007, I do not propose any change to arrangements agreed so recently at this review.

Considerable efforts have been made in recent years to register more service personnel and their families resident at the Barracks. This has resulted in a sizeable increase in the number of electors registered in Wimbish. It is understood also that there are plans to develop the site at Carver Barracks to help accommodate an expected 33% increase in personnel there (see the letter from the Head of Land Management Services to the Senior Planning Officer dated 6 March 2007).

Although, in the short to medium term, there is no doubt that a separate polling facility at Carver Barracks is desirable and useful to the community living there, the continuance of this arrangement is dependant on the future use of this site.

No change is considered to be necessary at Debden.

General Comments

In my role as Returning Officer I have ultimate responsibility to manage elections and my comments have been framed with this in mind.

I have a particular concern about the quality and training of staff I employ to control polling stations. It has always been a considerable challenge to source sufficient reliable staff to undertake this task and I have felt for some time that the number of polling stations should be minimised wherever possible. However, this must be balanced against the responsibility to provide convenient facilities for as many electors as possible and the requirement for each parish to form a separate polling district area. In a predominantly rural area, this effectively means that the number of polling stations is much greater per head of population than would be the case in a more urban environment.

A second concern is the past reluctance of Members to designate school premises for polling use. This was highlighted last year in relation to St Mary's Primary School in Saffron Walden. The law is framed in such a way that returning officers are allowed the automatic free use of school and other publicly funded facilities. It seems to me that this is deliberately designed to ensure the provision of adequate polling premises as, in many areas, this would otherwise be impossible.

It is entirely understandable that the needs of schoolchildren should be considered in this way. However, in my opinion, the law requires us to make the convenience of electors the primary consideration in conducting a review of polling districts, and this may sometimes lead to designating school premises, especially where no suitable alternative exists. It is my recommendation that Members be asked to take this on board.

I shall be grateful if you will arrange for my comments to be published on the Council's website within the required 30 days, and to draw them to the attention of Members.

Yours sincerely
Alasdair Bovaird
Chief Executive and Returning Officer