

Committee: Governance, Audit and Performance

Agenda Item

Date: 28 September 2017

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Title: Review of Polling Districts and Places

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Item for decision:
yes

Summary

1. This report seeks members' approval to conduct an interim review of polling districts and polling places within the Uttlesford District. A timetable is also included for approval.
2. An interim review of polling arrangements is needed because of uncertainty about some of the polling place venues designated in the polling scheme agreed from 1 December 2014 and subsequently revised on 25 February 2016. As at least one change has been enforced by the unavailability of the designated building and circumstances forced another change in 2015 without a full review process being undertaken, it is now appropriate to undertake an interim review to provide proper accountability for those changes and any further ones needed.
3. The next statutory review is not due to take place until the period beginning on 1 October 2018 and ending on 31 January 2020. A full review will be needed in any case before the ordinary district and parish elections due in May 2019.
4. An interim review can be carried out at any time depending on circumstances.

Recommendations

5. Approve the timetable and terms of reference for the polling review as set out in the report.

Financial Implications

6. The review will be carried out by the Democratic and Electoral Services team within the available budget.

Background Papers

7. All papers referred to by the author in the preparation of this report are already published and are widely available.

Impact

- 8.

Communication/Consultation	Full public consultation will be carried out
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	as part of the statutory review process
Community Safety	N/A
Equalities	There is a requirement to take account of the need for full accessibility in the buildings selected for polling
Health and Safety	The consideration of safety issues is included in the review process
Human Rights/Legal Implications	Rules set out in legislation must be followed in designating polling arrangements
Sustainability	N/A
Ward-specific impacts	Selected wards but potentially all of them
Workforce/Workplace	N/A

Situation

9. By law the Council is required to review UK Parliamentary polling districts and places every five years. The Council can review only those parts of the Saffron Walden Constituency included within the Uttlesford district and the same polling arrangements are then used for all other elections – county, district, parish and all referendums.
10. A polling district is a geographical area created by the sub-division of a Parliamentary constituency. In England, each parish must be a separate polling district but where the parish includes more than one ward (or parish ward) the polling district must not cross the ward boundary. For reasons of practicality, it is sensible to ensure that a single polling district does not include more than 3,000 electors.
11. A polling place is the building or area within each polling district in which polling stations will be located by the Returning Officer. A polling place within a polling district (small enough to be readily identified), must be designated so that polling stations are within easy reach of all electors from across the polling district.
12. The duty to designate polling places means taking into account the convenience of electors living in the area and to ensure compliance, as far as is practicable, with the accessibility needs of disabled electors.
13. The polling areas needing to be reviewed in the immediate future are –
 - Little Dunmow – Community Meeting Room (remote from the village centre along an unlit country lane)

- Chrishall – Old Village Hall (attached to the school and a new village hall is now available)
- Saffron Walden Audley South (the Friends School – renamed as Walden School – is now closed but had anyway decided not to host polling facilities from the beginning of 2017; the Council Offices site at London Road was used as the polling place location by default for the two polls in 2017 but has never been formally designated by the Council; the County High School is a potentially viable alternative as there are complications involved in using London Road and there may be other options)
- Saffron Walden Castle East (a mobile unit at the Homebase retail site was designated as the polling place in 2016 after the withdrawal of permission by the Dame Bradbury’s School to use the school site; the Homebase site was designated as an emergency measure without a full review process having been undertaken; the use of a mobile unit is clearly not ideal but the alternatives are limited; a further proper review is needed to explore and confirm the best arrangement for electors)
- Saffron Walden Castle West (Councillor R Freeman has questioned the use for polling of St Mary’s School in Castle Street on the grounds of inconvenience and disruption to parents and children attending the school; for that reason it is necessary to explore what alternatives might be available)
- Stansted North - St John’s Church Hall (the owners of the building have cast doubts on the continued use of the hall for election purposes as they have encountered some resistance from regular users)
- Great and Little Sampford – Baptist Church Hall, Great Sampford (it is understood the church hall is likely to be refurbished or redeveloped at some stage and it is not presently clear whether it will continue to be available for election use in future years)
- There may be others needing to be reviewed depending on the response received to the review.

14. At this stage it seems unlikely that any proposals will be made to change polling district boundaries. That would have an impact on the layout and composition of the Register of Electors and it would prove difficult to schedule the required changes in time for publication of the revised register by the required date of 1 December.

15. Nevertheless, population growth affecting a number of polling districts such as Elsenham, Saffron Walden Shire North, Stansted South, Takeley and Thaxted make it probable that some changes may be needed in the slightly longer term. For example, the electorate in Saffron Walden Shire North has already breached the 3,000 figure mentioned earlier in the report and there is further development taking place in the north of the polling district area near the Tesco store.

16. It is suggested that this interim review concentrates principally on designating suitable polling places for the polling districts mentioned in paragraph 13, leaving any more fundamental changes to the statutory review taking place after 1 October 2018.

17. The proposed timetable for the conduct and completion of the review is as follows –

- Monday 2 October - publish notice of the start of the review setting out the terms and scope of the review allowing four weeks for comments and alternative proposals to be received. All councillors will be consulted directly as will political parties, parish and town councils, the Acting Returning Officer and of course the public generally. The final date for the receipt of representations is proposed to be Monday 30 October.
- Where time permits, visits will be made to existing and potential polling venues to evaluate and assess the suitability of the facilities set against a range of criteria outlined in the Representation of the People Act 1983 (Schedule A1) and in Electoral Commission guidance.
- All representations received will be taken into account in drawing up proposals for changes to be made to the existing scheme. Representations must be published on the website within 30 days of receipt.
- Prepare a final set of proposals for designated polling districts and polling places and a draft decision notice to be submitted for approval to the Governance, Audit and Performance Committee meeting on 16 November 2017.
- Once approved under delegated powers, the revised scheme of polling districts and polling places will then be published taking effect as from 1 December 2017, together with the statement of reasons for those proposals.

18. The existing scheme is attached to this report for information.

19. Members are invited to agree the timetable and broad terms of reference for the review as outlined in this report.

Risk Analysis

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Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
2 – there is a risk that existing polling arrangements will	2 – it is necessary to review polling arrangements	3 – if the existing scheme is not reviewed and	Carry out an interim review of those areas where concerns are known to exist so that

not meet the needs and expectations of the public if they are not reviewed before the next statutory review is due to take place	in some areas as specified in the report to prevent them proving inadequate at future elections	any necessary changes put in place there is a danger of confusion leading to reduced turnout at future elections	all interested parties including the general public have an opportunity to suggest suitable polling arrangements
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1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.