

**Committee:** Audit and Standards Committee  
**Title:** Polling District and Polling Places Review 2023  
**Author:** Philip Hardy, Electoral Services Manager

**Date:** 28<sup>th</sup>  
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## Summary

1. The Electoral Registration and Administrations Act 2013 places a statutory responsibility on Councils, via the (Acting) Returning Officer, to carry out a UK Parliamentary polling district and polling places review every 5 years. This compulsory review must be started and completed between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025.
2. The adjoining councils of Braintree, Chelmsford and Harlow are also in the process of conducting a similar review exercise of its polling district and places; this includes the electoral areas within Chelmsford City Council's administrative boundary that lies in the North West Essex (formerly Saffron Walden) Parliamentary Constituency.
3. Harlow and Braintree District Councils' (Acting) Returning Officer for their respective Parliamentary Constituencies will have responsibility for two electoral areas (wards) – two each following the recent Parliamentary Boundary Review that also changed the name of the Saffron Walden Constituency. For completeness, this Council's (Acting) Returning Officer has reviewed those areas and will convey this to those two councils. Feedback has also been received from the (Acting) Returning Officer for Harlow regarding the polling places that will come its constituency.

## Recommendations

4. That approval be given to the (Acting) Returning Officer's recommendations for a revised Scheme of Polling District and Polling Places for the North West Essex Parliamentary Constituency and for changes to other Polling District and Places within the district, as from 1 December 2023, as set out in paragraph 24 of the report and in Appendix 2.

## Financial Implications

5. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Any recommendations for change have been based on what is considered to offer voters the best experience; it may be that venue hire costs vary marginally to those venues currently used but, in all cases, other than for district council elections, the costs can be recovered.

## Background Papers

6. All papers referred to by the author in the preparation of this report are already published and are widely available, including the Electoral Commission's guidance.

## Impact

7.

Communication/Consultation	Full public consultation has been carried out 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 and organisations that represent individuals with a wide range of needs have been consulted.
Health and Safety	The consideration of health and 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	N/A
Workforce/Workplace	N/A

## Situation

8. By law the council is required to review UK Parliamentary polling districts and places every five years. The last full review exercise was carried out in 2018. The council can review only those parts of the North West Essex Parliamentary constituency included within the Uttlesford district and the same polling arrangements are then used for all other elections such as for Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, county, district, parish and all referendums. However, for completeness the four wards that will come under Braintree and Harlow parliamentary constituencies respectively have been reviewed on behalf of those two councils and have incorporated their (A)RO's feedback.

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 and in accordance with the Electoral Commission's guidance no one polling station should have more than 2,250 electors allocated to it, this is net of absent voters on polling day.

9. A polling place is the building or area within each polling district in which polling stations will be located by the (Acting) 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. The polling station is the room within the building (polling place) where the actual voting takes place and designation of the station is for the (Acting) Returning Officer.
10. The duty to designate polling places means considering the convenience of electors living in the area and to ensure compliance, as far as is practicable, with the accessibility needs of disabled electors.
11. As delegated by full council, this committee has been authorised to consider these recommendations and approve any amendments.
12. At its meeting of 28 September 2023, the Audit and Standards Committee approved the timetable for this review.
13. Bearing in mind that the (Acting) Returning Officer in essence carries out a mini review at each poll about the polling place on its continued practicality and suitability, this review exercise has been light touch, aimed at highlighting specific concerns. This is also appropriate, given the limitations on options for changes especially in venues that can be made available across the council's large geographical area, which predominantly rural. There are very limited alternatives (if any) for a polling place in many areas.
14. The (Acting) Returning Officer has made no recommendations for change to existing polling districts – each one is a separate register of electors. However, bearing in mind the level of house building in parts of the district, there may well be the need for the splitting and creation of new polling districts at the next statutory review in five years' time.
15. The (Acting) Returning Officer was keen, as part of this review, to consider reasonable alternatives to the use of schools as polling places where possible. This council has a very small proportion of its polling place as schools, with just four venues. The (Acting) Returning Officer is allowed by law to select schools as polling places and this includes all mainstream schools, including academies. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 imposed a duty on (Acting) Returning Officers to review their choice of polling stations at least every four years, but they may also do so more frequently. This council has moved away from a number of schools. Bentfield primary school, Stansted and Great Sampford primary school being two specific examples which were previously in the council's approved polling scheme.

16. Schools are often in the most suitable area for the majority of the local electorate to easily reach. The school cannot charge for hire, just request payment for additional heating, lighting, and caretaking fees either side of the normal school day. The (Acting) Returning Officer must consider if there are other suitable premises nearby that can be booked for hire thus avoid any disruption to the school day, however, many schools use polling day as a teacher training day. With the rise in frequency of unscheduled elections/referendums, it can be very difficult for the staff to manage the impact on the education of children, particularly when the school must close as the only effective measure to manage the safeguarding risks. In addition, considerable inconvenience can be caused to parents and carers.
17. There are no proposals to increase the use of schools for polling, however an approach was made to use a private school in Saffron Walden - The Dame Bradbury Junior School as this is in the catchment area of APA Castle East polling district that currently votes at a mobile polling place/station placed on Homebase car park and is no longer considered appropriate.
18. Because of unscheduled elections, alternative arrangements to schools and other polling places have had to be made due to unavailability and this has provided the opportunity to assess the suitability of other venues, not previously used.
19. Public consultation with stakeholders, parish councils, local members, political parties, charities, and other interested bodies took place between 2 October and 13 November. During this period a number of comments and observations were received.
20. All the representations received have been examined and a final set of proposals for designated polling stations has been prepared as the Acting Returning Officer's draft recommendations.
21. Public notice of these draft recommendations has been placed on the Council's website, following the close of the consultation period on 13 November.
22. Details of the consultees are set out in **Appendix 1** and the consultation comments are set out under paragraph 24 below. The proposed revised scheme for polling districts for North West Essex Parliamentary Constituency and the district as a whole, is set out at **Appendix 2**, and is for approval.

## Risk Analysis

23.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
There is a risk that existing polling arrangements will	2 – It is necessary to review polling arrangements	3 – If changes are not put in place there is a danger of	Carry out a review of those areas where concerns are known to exist so that all

not meet the needs and expectations of the public	in some areas as specified in the report to prevent them proving inadequate at future elections	confusion leading to reduced turnout at future elections	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.

## 24. Consultation Reponses

### **ABD - Hatfield Broad Oak**

The Acting Returning Officer and Chief Executive from Harlow Council, where this polling district would come under from the next Parliamentary General Election, has made the following comments about the St John Evangelist Church i.e. the current polling place:

*The Church is lacking in space (the station has to be set up in the church pews); facilities (lack of heating and only a kettle for the staff to use); also disabled access is not completely adequate with an uneven gravel path that is not lit up at night.*

*As there seems to be no other alternative options in the polling district of which we are currently aware, consideration could be given to using Hatfield Broad Oak Village Hall, either as 2 polling stations in the one place or combine the two current polling districts into one. The church is not in the main part of Bush End and the properties in this rural area are spread out so I expect most electors attending the station would drive. Therefore, it is suggested that electors would be happy to drive to the village hall in Hatfield Broad Oak. There are only 105 electors in Bush End and so there is ample space in the village hall to accommodate a small increase in the electorate or set up another polling station in the hall for these electors. Hatfield Broad Oak Village Hall has better facilities and disabled access.*

### **Uttlesford (A)RO comments:**

Electors at the adjoining polling district (ABC) vote at the Hatfield Broad Oak village hall which, as of 1 August had just 876 electors, and this venue is large enough and has suitable facilities that could easily accommodate voters for the whole of Hatfield Broad Oak parish.

I agree with the comments made by the ARO at Harlow. The one polling station could accommodate voters from both polling districts. The only time

that separate provision would need to be made would be for a Parish election like in May 2023, when just one of the parish wards was contested, but this could be accommodated by splitting the polling place in to two stations for that poll.

**Recommendation:**

That voters from polling district ABD Bush End vote forthwith at the Hatfield Broad Oak Village Hall and use of the church be discontinued.

**AHB – Great Dunmow North West**

Great Dunmow primary school is the polling place for the 2,000 voters of north west of the parish. As mentioned above school sites are generally in convenient locations for voters as this school is but it is not ideal as the school likes to stay open. Parking is very limited; it is on a bank and the school themselves request security fencing to enable clear segregation of voters and pupils to enhance safeguarding. At the elections in May a complaint was received about the lack of disabled parking as someone had to park much further away than they would have liked.

**Uttlesford (A)RO comments:**

Ideally the (Acting) Returning Officer would like to move to a different venue with better access and parking, however there is currently no such venues in the polling district.

No comments were made during the consultation period. Consequently, in the absence of an alternative venue being available, it is recommended to stay at the school site, however, the school be requested to consider closing especially at a parliamentary general election due to the number of voters.

**Recommendation:**

That the Great Dunmow Primary School continue to be the allocated polling place for polling district AHB, however the school be approached to recommend that they close on polling day and specifically at a parliamentary general election.

**APA – Castle East**

A temporary polling station is used in this polling district, this being a portacabin placed on Homebase car park for the 1,640 electorate.

A portacabin is not at all ideal as space for voters and polling staff is very limited. The number of electors allocated to the venue means that a minimum of 2 poll clerks should be appointed in addition to the presiding officer. Ideally 3 poll clerks should be allocated in accordance with the Electoral Commission's revised staffing ratios due to measures under the Elections Act 2022. However, there is insufficient room to have 4 staff and limited space for

the staff to sort their paperwork. There is also no area for any voter to show their identification document in private should they so request.

Disability access is not great even with a ramp provided; this requires a handrail due to its length. The staff must use the toilet facilities at Homebase where an electric cable is linked for heating and lighting. Though not a main consideration, such venues are also very expensive costing well over £1,000 where the average cost of polling stations across the district is nearer £300.

#### **Uttlesford (A)RO comments:**

Due to the comments on general unsuitability of using portacabins on health, safety, welfare, space and cost grounds, the A(RO) wishes to move to a permanent venue, ideally within the polling district.

The Community Hospital was considered but there are no such buildings within the site suitable to hire.

A venue that has been used in the past is the Dame Bradbury's Junior School. This school like the hospital is in the polling district. This is an independent school, and the A(RO) does not have the power to use such a school as a right. The school was last used in 2015 and was going to be used at the Police and Crime Commissioner election in May 2016 but they withdrew their support four months before polling day. I have no details of why the governors withdrew support. In the absence of anywhere else suitable voters were allocated to this mobile venue on Homebase car park.

The school has been approached and are still to respond.

The Saffron Walden Town Council has suggested that voters could be allocated to the Town Hall. We already use this as a polling place for AOA Audley North with voters attending the Committee Room as the polling station. The Town Council would make the Council Chamber available for the APA electorate thus segregating voters. The venue is big enough to do this. Both rooms are large enough and fully accessible for voters.

We have had no adverse feedback from local members about this suggestion, just positive comments such as from Castle Ward district councillor Freeman:

*I agree that the Homebase arrangement is less than ideal. The Town Hall certainly can accommodate a second polling station (we usually have one for Shire Ward in the lower rooms at the back, with an entrance opposite Starbucks). The Castle Polling Station could, for example, be the Court Room; or the remaining room opposite the Shire Ward station.*

*The arrangement using the church in Castle Street works well. It used to be the school, further up the street, but that involved the school being closed for the day – which is absurd. This is probably the reason for the reluctance of the former Dame Bradbury's School in Ashdon Road to host a polling station.*

*Schools nowadays have very strict safeguarding arrangements and opening them to the public causes all sorts of extra work for the staff.*

Saffron Walden Shire Ward district councillor McBirnie commented that:

*Saffron Walden Town Hall makes sense rather than the Homebase portable site.*

As with all changes we shall monitor feedback at future elections.

The voters would vote out of their ward; however, it is still within the Town Council area, only one mile from the electorate that would attend the Homebase car park venue and in the town centre. This is allowed in the Regulations. The electorate would have a much better voter experience and there would be improved health, safety, and welfare for the (A)RO's staff.

**Recommendation:**

That Saffron Walden Town Hall be the preferred polling place for the APA Castle East electors. Electors to be allocated a different room as a polling station to the AOA Audley North electorate.

**Other comments received:**

**Great Canfield Parish Council**

Great Canfield parish council confirms it has no comments to make on existing arrangements other than they are satisfactory.

**Uttlesford A(RO)'s comment:**

Polling is at the Great canfield Church Hall on Marsh Lane and is considered suitable.

**Saffron Walden Town Council**

**APA – Mobile Unit at Homebase**

SWTC feels this is an inadequate location and poorly accessible for residents.

Alternative buildings could be Dame Bradburys school, Town Hall (whilst out of Ward it is an existing station), the Church, Lime Avenue changing facilities.

Comments from local councillors R Freeman and D McBirnie are included within the body of the report.

**Uttlesford A(RO)'s comment:**



These suggestions have been explored. Dame Bradbury's school approached, and the Town Hall recommended.

### **Stansted Mountfitchet Parish Council**

Members agreed that that the Parish Council has no comments to make on the review.

### **Uttlesford A(RO)'s comment:**

Polling provision is improved since using the Mountfitchet Exchange venue which is proposed to be formally endorsed as part of the revised polling scheme.

### **Hearing Help Essex**

Though received just prior to the formal review commencing, the (A)RO had very useful comments from this local organisation provided help and assistance for people with hearing difficulties.

*I would ask you to consider space available in polling stations – many of your residents wear hearing aids so being able to have a clear conversation with the Officer when there are other conversations happening at the same time can be very difficult. Having a bit of a quieter space to one side could be really helpful to the 1 in 5 Uttlesford residents who experience hearing loss.*

*Also having any instructions clearly available for view – e.g. laminated cards with what the officers would say etc will aid communication too. As many of your residents will also have eye deterioration too, I would recommend these are typed in minimum font 16, but I am sure your local sight-loss charity will advise on this.*

### **Uttlesford (A)RO comments:**

This suggestion is warmly welcomed and can be easily and cheaply introduced for all stations for all polls going forward.

## APPENDIX 1

### Consultees

Key stakeholders were invited to comment on the review, these being local political parties and elected members/officials at different levels of representation, including the following:

MP for the North West Essex Parliamentary Constituency, the Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP

Acting Returning Officer for Braintree, Chelmsford (see note 1 below) and Harlow Parliamentary Constituencies

Essex County Council

District Councillors

Town and Parish Clerks

Main contacts for local political parties – The Conservative Party, Green Party, The Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and Residents for Uttlesford

The following disability groups were also contacted:

Age UK Essex
Alzheimer's Society
Citizens Advice
UCAN formally CVSU
Carers First
Home-Start Essex (Uttlesford)
League of Friends Saffron Walden Community Hospital
Lioness Club
Mind in West Essex
Royal British Legion
Saffron Walden Dementia Alliance
Saffron Walden Mencap
Outreach Project
St Claires Hospice
Support 4 Sight
Thaxted Centre for the Disabled
Uttlesford Community Travel
Uttlesford Frontline
Hearing Help

**Note 1** – Chelmsford is currently carrying out its review of its polling provision which may lead to a change of a polling place within this part of the North West Essex constituency, though currently none are indicated.