

**DRAFT STATEMENT OF REASONS FOR CHANGES TO THE SCHEME OF
POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES IN THE UTTLESFORD DISTRICT
(PART IN THE SAFFRON WALDEN PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY) TO BE
APPLIED FROM 28 MAY 2018**

All wards are as defined in The Uttlesford (Electoral Changes) Order 2014.

The scheme to be applied is as set out in full in the Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places approved on 17 May 2018 and published on 25 May. The following statement contains a full explanation of the reasons for changes made to the scheme as published on 17 November 2014. The new scheme will be reflected in the Register of Electors published by 1 December 2018 and applied at all elections held in the Uttlesford District (fully contained in the Saffron Walden Parliamentary Constituency) from 29 May 2018.

Polling District AGB Little Dunmow

Decision: Retain the Community Meeting Room, Recreation Ground off Brook Street as the designated polling place for Little Dunmow.

Reasons: The Community Meeting Room remains the only viable location in Little Dunmow to accommodate polling facilities.

One representation was received previously (not as part of this review) about the suitability of the Community Meeting Room on the basis that the building is located away from the village centre along an unlit lane and is therefore inconvenient for electors in Little Dunmow. An undertaking was made that the location would be reviewed at the next available opportunity.

The Community Meeting Room has been used at all elections since 2011. It is effectively a temporary building encased in a metal shell. Although the internal space is quite small, this is sufficient to accommodate the 300 electors on the register. The building is used for community activities and for parish council meetings.

Prior to 2011, the Flitch of Bacon Public House was the designated polling place. This was never very satisfactory as polling had to operate side by side with the public house remaining open, although the polling station was screened off as far as it was possible to manage.

A discussion has taken place with the present owners of the Flitch of Bacon and the conclusion reached is that polling use would be possible only if the free house were to close for the day. Although the owners were sympathetic, they would not be prepared to apply closure of their business to allow polling to take place.

Polling District AHB Great Dunmow North-West

Decision: Retain Great Dunmow Primary School, off Woodlands Park Drive as the designated polling place for Great Dunmow North-West.

Reasons: This polling district was not originally included as part of the interim review. A representation was subsequently received from the PA to the Head Teacher asking for consideration to be given to an alternative venue for this part of Great Dunmow. The School then suggested a number of possible venues but these buildings are all already in use for other polling districts and are not therefore suitable for consideration.

Previous investigation has shown that the Primary School is the only community building available in the Woodlands Park area of Great Dunmow and that remains the case. The school hall is an ideal facility for the location of either one or two polling stations but access to the site is less than satisfactory. A previous review explored the option of locating a mobile unit at the Tesco store but this proved not to be feasible.

Difficulties have arisen in respect of the use of the school for polling because of the heightened awareness of security and safeguarding considerations. This is becoming an increasingly prevalent problem in the use of schools for polling. In 2016, the school undertook a safeguarding review after concerns were raised about adequate security on the site.

The outcome of the review was the installation of a secure access keypad on the gates at either end of the school site. The gates are left unlocked for a period at the beginning and end of each school day to enable parents and children access to the premises. At all other times access is restricted by the keypad with controlled entry administered by the school.

Before the General Election took place in 2017 it became apparent that the school (which had always previously remained open on polling days), was expecting electors to buzz at the gate to obtain entry to the school grounds and therefore to the polling station. This was clearly an unacceptable condition to accept in managing the election and so the school was asked either to arrange to leave the gate open or unlocked throughout polling hours, or to close for the day. In the event the school elected to close.

During discussion it became apparent that the school has already arranged to close on 3 May this year, even though no election was taking place. During discussion with the Head Teacher he requested that consideration be given to putting extra security measures in place to enable the school to remain open on polling days. This is something that will be considered by the Returning Officer and Electoral Services Manager in making arrangements at future elections.

Whatever arrangements are made to facilitate effective polling arrangements, it remains clear that no suitable alternative location is available in Great Dunmow North-West and it is proposed the Primary School remains as the designated polling place.

AMA Polling District AMA Chrishall

Decision: Designate the (New) Village Hall in Crawley End as the polling place in Chrishall, in place of the (Old) Village Hall attached to the Primary School.

Reasons: What is now termed as the old village hall is the existing designated polling place in Chrishall and has been the polling location for a number of years. It is attached to the school and so causes disruption whenever elections take place.

The new hall has been inspected and is entirely suitable to accommodate polling facilities. It is the former Methodist Church and was purchased and converted for use as a village hall by the Parish Council several years ago.

There are two separate halls either side of an entrance lobby area, either of which would be suitable for the location of a polling station. In fact the smaller of the two halls is the better of the two halls for polling as only one polling station is required to accommodate the 450 electors in Chrishall. The only problem is that there are two steps leading from the car park to the main entrance so that a ramp will need to be fitted on polling days to meet the Council's duty to designate buildings that are accessible for disabled electors.

All other facilities at the hall are fully suitable for polling use and it is therefore proposed to change the polling location in Chrishall from the old to the new village hall.

AOB Polling District AOB Saffron Walden Audley South

Decision: Designate either the Council Offices or the County High School as the polling place for the Saffron Walden Audley South polling district in place of the Assembly Hall at the Friends' School, Mount Pleasant Road.

Reasons: The Friends' School (latterly renamed as the Walden School) closed for business in 2017. The site is presently vacant and there is no certainty about its future use as a school (although it is now understood the site has been sold for development, possibly to include a primary school). Before the closure came into effect, the business manager stated that neither the assembly room (the designated location for polling) nor the car park would be made available on any future occasion. Careful examination of potential polling locations in Audley South has narrowed the available options down to either the Council Offices or the County High School. A clear recommendation is not being made in this report as there are problems associated with the use of either site for polling. The relevant considerations are set out in the following paragraphs.

Audley Ward is divided into two separate polling districts for reasons of convenience and because there are too many electors (roughly 3,500) to accommodate in a single building. Audley North consists mainly of the town centre area. Audley South is an almost entirely residential area south of the High Street and west of Debden Road/Pleasant Valley containing some 2,300 electors. The only community buildings in the polling district area are the Council Offices and the County High School (CHS).

It is possible to accommodate polling on the Council Offices site but there are difficulties involved in making arrangements that are suitable for polling. The only part of the Council Offices able to accommodate a polling station is the staff room at the north end of the building. The staff room has a separate entrance/exit leading directly from the car park. The entrance is level and sufficiently wide to accommodate wheelchair access.

The staff room was used for polling at the County Council election last May. However, only one polling station was provided for the approximately 1,850 in person electors eligible to cast a vote on the day. At the Parliamentary election in June 2017, it was necessary to provide two polling stations to accommodate the expected high turnout of voters. The staff room is too small to accommodate two polling stations.

The solution in June 2017 was to locate two mobile units in part of the car park at the front of the building. Although this arrangement worked well for polling at the General Election, it is far from ideal in a number of respects. The location of two large mobile units is logistically difficult to manage as the units have to be lifted off the delivery lorry and manoeuvred into place. It is an expensive operation and takes up part of the car park for the best part of three or four days.

When the mobile units were located for polling in June 2017, there was an unavoidable mingling of pedestrians and cars accessing the car park. There was feedback from polling inspectors and reception staff that many voters ignored clear signage and approached the reception area before being redirected. Another factor is that the location used for polling is used by tenants of the Council and the Police who need unrestricted vehicular access close to the polling stations.

There are also problems associated with the use of the CHS site. A number of meetings have already taken place at the school with the Head of Facilities and Operations where various options for polling have been explored. Part of the sports centre block known as the Dance Studio has been identified as suitable for polling. There is a level entrance leading directly from the lower car park area accessed from the entrance to Copperfields. The Dance Studio is located just inside the sports block with a separate entrance accessed from the corridor and is a large enough space comfortably to accommodate the two polling stations required for the majority

of electoral events. In terms of the facilities available for electors, the Dance Studio is entirely suitable.

However, objections have been raised by the CHS on grounds of security and safeguarding for the children under the care and protection of the school during schooling hours. A communication from the Head's PA dating back to February 2017 states: "Our main concern regarding a request of this nature is around the potential safeguarding risk it poses to our students during the school day. We operate a strict 'signing in' policy for every visitor to our site, who are each required to report to the school's main reception area on arrival at the school. Visitors are issued with a lanyard – green for those where we have a verification that a satisfactory DBS check is in place, and red for all other visitors. Visitors with red lanyards are not permitted to move around the school site unaccompanied."

Other objections have been raised by the school because of the disruption polling would cause the school in managing other activities taking place in the Sports Centre. This often involves exams as well as sports related activities.

There is one further major factor involved in deciding whether polling is feasible on the CHS site and that relates to traffic movements entering and leaving the site on school days. An inspection took place on 24 April when it became apparent that traffic movements on the school site peak between 08:15 and 08:40 and again between 15:20 and 15:35. During those times it is readily apparent that electors would find it difficult to access the site by car unless the school is closed.

Pedestrian accesses onto the school site also peak at those times leading to congested footways although it would be possible for electors to negotiate the paths on foot during those times. However, the safeguarding issues would remain and it would be a matter of policy for the school to manage those matters during school hours. During normal school days, the gates are closed between 09:00 and 15:00. While students are accessing or leaving the site, a member of the school's staff supervises student access.

The statutory rules relating to polling reviews state that the Council must ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances. They must also ensure that every polling place is accessible to disabled electors.

In early 2017 there was insufficient time to conduct an interim review when it became apparent the Friends' School would no longer be available for polling. The Returning Officer made such suitable arrangements as necessary to provide polling facilities for electors in Audley South.

On a previous occasion (in 2014), the Council considered changing the polling place for Audley South. This was because of continuing uncertainty about the availability of the Friends' School. At that time the Electoral Working Group recommended

designating the CHS but this was overturned by the Full Council in agreeing a revised polling scheme.

There is little doubt that the CHS would provide the best possible polling facility for electors in Audley South but this arrangement would probably work only if the school were to close on polling days. This is clearly a difficult option for members to consider.

Members are asked to decide which of the Council Offices or the CHS should be the designated polling place for electors in Audley South.

APA Polling District Saffron Walden Castle East

Decision: Retain the Homebase retail car park in Elizabeth Way, Saffron Walden (where a mobile unit is located for use as a polling station) as the designated polling place for the Castle East polling district.

Reasons: When the Dame Bradbury School in Ashdon Road withdrew permission in late 2015 for polling to take place in their school hall, other options were explored within the polling district area. In fact alternative polling locations in Castle East proved so limited that arrangements were made with Homebase for their car parking area to be used for the location of a mobile unit.

This facility has now been used successfully in the four different polls taking place in 2016 and 2017. However, it is not an ideal arrangement for polling to take place in a mobile unit housed on a retail site. It is an expensive option and causes logistical problems in managing the polling site during the election period. It is though convenient for the majority of electors as the location is relatively central to the area.

It is always wise to have a back-up plan in place and this was highlighted recently by the announcement about the precarious future of Homebase stores. Discussions have been held with the local management at the Saffron Walden store when it became apparent that there is little news, either positive or negative, about the future of the site. For the moment it must be assumed that the Saffron Walden Homebase store is secure. The present manager has given reasonable assurances about the availability of the site for polling into the immediate future.

Attempts have been made as part of this review to explore alternative options for polling in Castle East. One relevant factor is the development of the Ridgeons site on top of the smaller developments in the polling area adjoining Ashdon Road and Radwinter Road. The new occupiers of these sites will trickle through and make a long term impact on the number of electors on the register. In time this may have the result of increasing the provision of polling stations in Castle East from one to two. Although this is a matter for the Returning Officer rather than the Council, it will impact on the space provision needed in the Homebase car park.

Other than Dame Bradbury's School, and the Saffron Walden Hospital site which would not be suitable, it has still not been possible to identify another community building in Castle East. Discussions have taken place with managers at the Tesco retail unit off Radwinter Road, to act as a potential back-up to the Homebase site. The reaction from Tesco was positive. They agreed to make space available for a mobile unit unless arrangements had already been made to locate a breast screening or blood donation unit on site at the same time.

The problem with such an arrangement is that the Tesco site is not located within Castle East as the ward boundary runs along Elizabeth Way and Radwinter Road. However, locating polling on the Tesco site is an alternative and would be convenient for the majority of electors in this area.

However, because of the assurances given about the continued use of the Homebase site, it is proposed the designation of this site should be confirmed.

APB Polling District Saffron Walden Castle West

Decision: Designate Saffron Walden Community Church in Castle Street as the polling place for Castle West in place of St Mary's Primary School, also in Castle Street.

Reasons: Very many representations were received as part of the polling review objecting to the continuing use of the primary school for polling. Other options were again explored with the outcome that the Community Church appears very well suited to accommodating polling facilities and would therefore be a good alternative.

St Mary's Primary School has been used as the polling location in Castle West for a number of years. This is because the school hall has until now been the best available facility to accommodate the 1900 electors registered in this part of Saffron Walden. It has been essential to retain use of the school hall to locate the two polling stations needed to deal with the efficient throughput of electors.

Unfortunately, the need to use this facility has meant the closure of the school on polling days as the school cannot function for the provision of meals without use of the hall.

Representations objecting to this use were received from Councillor Richard Freeman, the Head Teacher and Chair of Governors of the School, Saffron Walden Town Council and a number of parents of children attending the school. In addition, a petition was received signed by approximately 120 parents, guardians and other members of the community, asking that alternative locations should be considered.

Alternative locations considered, as well as the Community Church, were the Town Football Club, the car park at Catons Lane, St Mary's Church Parish Room, the Catholic Church Hall, and The Pavilion off Catons Lane.

Most of these locations are unsuitable for one reason or another but the Community Church proved on inspection to be entirely suitable for this use. The Pastor, the Revd Jonathan Burton was enthusiastic to use the church as a community building to assist the democratic process. The entrance to the church is level and wide enough to accommodate wheelchair users. It opens into a large open space area used for services comfortably able to accommodate the efficient throughflow of electors voting at a double station that would be required.

One disadvantage associated with this site is the limited number of parking spaces. These are accessed via a narrow entrance area and would be needed for the use of polling staff, so there would be no dedicated parking provision for electors. However, that is already the case at St Mary's School and there is ample alternative parking provision in the street opposite and in Saffron Walden town centre generally. All other facilities needed to ensure the smooth running of the polling station(s) are more than adequate.

It is recommended that the Community Church be designated for polling use in Castle West at all future elections in place of St Mary's School.

AQA Polling District Saffron Walden Shire North

Decision: Retain the School Hall at the R A Butler Academy as the designated polling place for the Shire North polling district.

Reasons: In terms of elector numbers, Saffron Walden Shire Ward is the largest ward in the district (presently 5500 electors). There are approximately 3000 electors registered in the Shire North polling district. This number of electors is very close to the cut-off point above which managing the number of electors accessing a single building becomes unviable, or at least very challenging. For example, at both the 2016 EU Referendum and at last year's general Election, queues of electors formed at different times during the day.

The polling arrangements in Shire North were not originally part of this review but were added following the receipt of representations sent on behalf of the School's governing body. The representation stated that there was only one entrance/exit to be used safely by over 600 parents and children. This entrance had to be closed during polling for the General Election to enable two separate entrances/exits to be made available. This resulted in over congestion caused by too many pedestrians needing to walk through the car parking area. It is a problem already apparent at peak traffic periods in the busy and narrow street (South Road) giving access to the site.

A number of classrooms obtain access directly off the school hall. As the School has elected to remain open during polling, arrangements had to be put in place at the General Election to screen off the polling stations from the classroom access area by means of internal barriers located towards the rear of the hall.

As a result of the School's concerns about safeguarding issues, the school allocated a member of staff to monitor the safety of pupils. This caused difficulties in terms of the Returning Officer's duty to ensure the secrecy of the ballot, as only electors and specified participants in polling can be allowed to access the polling station. The School states that all visitors to the site are required to be signed in and out and this is not possible whilst polling is in progress.

Complaints were received from some electors about the lack of parking notices given on the poll card. However, the School had already arranged to reserve some spaces for use by teaching staff at Faircroft and so some parking provision was probably available.

A visit to the school took place on 19 April when discussions were held with Paul Belzar, the Business Manager. The problems encountered on both sides were discussed fully and openly and Mr Belzar accepted the School remains the best available facility in this part of Saffron Walden, especially as the security gate beyond the hall entrance means it is feasible for the school to remain open.

To explore another possible option, arrangements were made to inspect Faircroft House where discussions took place with the owner of the community arts venture, Tim Atkinson. Faircroft House was once used for polling in this part of the town when ward and polling boundaries were much different. Although the site is suitable for polling in principle and has good parking facilities, it is outside the Shire North polling district boundary, has a much smaller internal space than the school in which to accommodate the two stations that would be needed.

It would be risky to change polling location now, especially in view of the new electors due to come on stream from the development near the Tesco site which might necessitate a reconfiguration of polling district boundaries within the Shire ward. Such a reconfiguration will be explored at the next statutory polling review next year.

For the above reasons it is being recommended to retain the School Hall at the R A Butler Academy as the designated polling place in Shire North.

ARA Polling District Stansted East

Decision: Retain St John's Church Hall off St John's Road as the designated polling place for the Stansted East polling district.

Reasons: St John's Church Hall was first designated for polling use at the interim review in early 2016. This was required following changes made at the adjoining Peter Kirk Centre when the site was vacated by the Adult Community Learning Service. Notice was given in May 2017 to discontinue availability of the hall for polling after the General Election because of concerns raised by other regular hall users. That notice has now been revoked following a meeting held on 23 April with the hall manager. The Church Hall remains entirely suitable for polling and now that

uncertainty has been removed it is proposed the existing designation should continue.

The former Adult Learning site is now occupied by the Magna Carta Primary School (since September 2016) and will continue to be used until the new school being built on the site of the old primary school is ready for occupation in September 2018. An inspection was made of the existing school site to allow for a fallback position in the event that the Church Hall was withdrawn from use.

Now that confirmation has been obtained about the availability of the Church Hall, no change in the existing arrangements is being proposed.

AWA Polling District Great and Little Sampford

Decision: For the period until the next statutory polling review following the local elections in May 2019, change the polling place for Great and Little Sampford from the Baptist Church Hall to Great Sampford Primary School. The polling place will again be reviewed after the May 2019 elections to evaluate and decide the best polling location in Great Sampford.

Reasons: There is uncertainty about the availability of Great Sampford Baptist Church next year because of proposed improvements to the Church. This involves building work to convert the existing church hall into living accommodation for the Pastor. Following this conversion work, the existing church will be upgraded to provide a community facility, including the provision of toilets and improved kitchen facilities. The Church was inspected on 24 April.

An inspection of the Primary School took place on the same day and discussions held with the Head Teacher, Mr Athanasiou. He explained that the school hall is a shared community facility and changes from school use at 6pm. The Head Teacher expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of polling taking place at the school even though this would lead to closure on polling days. Closure would be needed because the school kitchen opens directly into the hall area and would therefore compromise use of the hall for polling.

It seems likely that the Baptist Church will be suitable for polling use once again (technically transferred from the former hall next door) after the completion of building work but there is presently uncertainty about when the work will finish.

In view of this uncertainty, the less risky option is to designate the Primary School Hall as the polling place, at least until a full review of polling arrangements in the district can be undertaken in the second half of 2019.

Statement of Reasons prepared by Peter Snow on behalf of Dawn French, Returning Officer for the Saffron Walden Constituency and the Uttlesford District coming into effect on 29 May 2018