

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2007

RETURNING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

Background

The Council is carrying out a review of polling districts and places as required by regulations made under the Electoral Administration Act 2006. One of the requirements of the regulations is that a report must be produced by the Returning Officer on existing and proposed new polling stations. The Returning Officer must focus on the suitability of stations in relation to

- Access for all electors including those with any disability
- Facilities for the required staff, tables, booths and notices.

Current arrangements are as set out in the attached schedule of polling stations and building summary report, covering those places within Breckland in the Mid-Norfolk and South-West Norfolk Parliamentary Constituencies.

Existing and alternative arrangements have been examined. Other than where indicated below, and subject to the results of consultation, it is proposed that these places should continue to be used. These proposals take account of observations made in the past and also the suitability and accessibility of existing arrangements and, in some cases, the lack of a better alternative.

Specific Comments

ATTLEBOROUGH QUEENS

The Attleborough Town Hall has been used in the last few years as the polling station for this ward. The premises meet the criteria, except in the respect that the lighting in the room is more suited to its use as a venue for social functions than this practical use. The venue is otherwise central and convenient and it is suggested that additional temporary lighting is provided on those occasions when it is used as a polling station.

BINTREE & TWYFORD

The Village Hall is currently out of commission and pending repair. As a temporary measure, a room at The Manor House, The Street, was used for the District Council elections in May 2007. This station met the suggested criteria and has some advantage over the Village Hall in the respect that it does not involve a large proportion of the electorate crossing the busy Fakenham to Norwich Road. It is suggested that this venue continue to be used.

CARBROOKE

The parish of Carbrooke is split into a rural area, where the traditional village centre and the current polling station are situated, and a built-up area adjoining and geographically indistinguishable from the town of Watton. The Carbrooke/Watton boundary is unclear and should be addressed by a boundary review, which is outside the scope of this review. An additional station could be justified in terms of improving convenience and accessibility to those residents adjoining Watton, although this would not otherwise be justified by the size of the electorate and there is no obvious venue for an additional station.

DEREHAM

The review of electoral arrangements which took effect in 2003 left an anomaly for some voters as far as access to polling stations was concerned. In order to achieve a more even elector/member ratio, it was necessary to transfer an area in the south of the town from the Toftwood Ward to the Central Ward. This means that some residents actually go past their former station (Toftwood Village Hall) to get to the Central Ward station at London Road. To overcome this, it would be necessary to split the Central Ward register to enable those voters in the south of the town to use an alternative. One possibility would be the Toftwood Junior School; another would be the Fred Nicholson School. Both would be suitable, but if either were used it would benefit a limited number of electors – about 1000 - and the split would be uneven, the total electorate for the ward being just over 4,300. It would, however, overcome the inconvenience and anomaly affecting electors at the southern part of Central Ward and thus merit consideration..

Otherwise, locations currently used as polling places in Dereham meet the criteria.

MERTON

At present, a caravan is used in this location, there being no alternative other than re-routing the parish electorate to Watton or Thompson, between 1 and 2 miles away. It is suggested that the inconvenience of relocating to another parish outweighs the inconvenience to the Merton electorate of having to use a caravan and the current situation should continue.

ROUDHAM

The same applies to Roudham as Merton, with Bridgham or East Harling providing the only viable alternatives, with similar distances involved. On balance, it is felt that the small electorate is less inconvenienced by using a caravan locally than having to travel.

SCARNING

The population of Scarning has shifted from the former village centre, around the Church and the Village Hall, where the current station is situated, some two miles to the east, at the boundary with Dereham. For the last two or three elections, there have been calls for an alternative from politicians, but these have not been supported by the Parish Council and there has been no alternative except for the school, which has always resisted being a polling place. Following a change of heart from the Parish Council and more calls from local representatives, it was proposed to use the school in May 2007; however, the Governors strongly objected, as did the Parish Council, on the grounds that the Council was not taking advantage of the newly refurbished Village Hall. The school would undoubtedly be more central. If the school was required, then legally it would have to be made available. The Village Hall scores better on facilities. There have been no representations from local electors.

For the convenience of voters, the school should be used .

SHIPDHAM

The Thomas Bullock School is an adequate polling place and the station meets the criteria suggested by the Electoral Commission. There is one regular complainant , who is concerned at the fact that a gate, which would be more convenient than the one electors are required to use, is locked (this is to do with concurrent use of the premises as a play school). An alternative would be the WI Hall, which has all the necessary facilities, but is less central. The Returning Officer would not recommend a change to the current arrangements.

STANFIELD

A room used at Cherry Tree Farm has become unavailable, leaving no suitable premises in the parish. For the District Council election in May 2007, therefore, voters were redirected to the adjoining parish of Tittleshall. It was explained to the one or two objectors that any alternative, such as a room in a private house, did not meet the basic criteria. Unless the facilities at Cherry Tree Farm become available again, it is suggested that the arrangements used in May continue.

STOW BEDON

There is no viable polling place in Stow Bedon, The Church has been used , but does not meet the basic criteria. In the absence of a suitable place, Stow Bedon electors should be directed to Caston (Village Hall), as they have been in the past.

SWAFFHAM

A double polling station for the unwarded town of Swaffham is housed in the Assembly Rooms. The electorate for the two stations exceeds Electoral Commission suggested maxima. The refurbished building provides an excellent polling place under present polling arrangements. The split in the register needs to be kept carefully under review pending any proposals for warding.

THETFORD

An additional station has been introduced this year to serve the Cloverfields development (Cloverfields Church and Community Hall). An adjustment to the register is needed to ensure that electors in this part of the Guildhall Ward are directed to the most convenient station. No other changes to polling places are proposed at present, but future development will need to be taken into account in considering polling districts. Development outside the existing town boundaries will have an effect on Croxton and Brettenham/Kilverstone electorates and also probably generate a call for a boundary review. Proposals put forward by the Town Council on two previous occasions to extend the town boundaries to the bypass, encompassing part of Croxton, and to the south and east to take in development within Brettenham, were not supported by the District Council following consultation, which brought forth considerable opposition from the parishes.

WATTON

The same comments as those made for Swaffham are applicable here. Queen's Hall is a vast improvement on the polling place previously used.

1st August, 2007.