



POLLING DISTRICT, PLACES & STATIONS REVIEW 2019

Draft Scheme

Introduction

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 (EAA 2006) introduced the requirement to carry out a review of polling districts and polling places every 5 years. As the District boundary is not coterminous with the Parliamentary Constituency boundary I have included for completeness the attached polling places and stations that come under the Acting Returning Officers' (ARO) responsibilities for the North East Hertfordshire Constituency – North Herts Council's (A)RO and Stevenage Constituency under Stevenage Council's ARO – who will be seeking my comments on the relevant areas of East Hertfordshire that currently come under these two Constituencies in regard to parliamentary voting.

Prior to 2007, the council designated the entire polling district as the polling place so it was easier for polling places to be altered in the event of a building becoming unavailable. Section 18B(4)(e) of the Representation of the People Act RPA 1983, recommended that the polling place should be defined and this is what has done in the attached scheme. If a building becomes unavailable before an election and there is no time to conduct a review, the polling place can be changed by the authority immediately. This can be achieved by a simple declaration or notice that a polling place has been changed. Any change could be made by the proper officer¹ of the Council by notice published at their office². A review into the polling place would then be made when time allows.

Once a decision on the proposals is made two key factors must be addressed in the reasoning given for the change to or maintaining the status quo:

- The reasonable requirements of the electors in the constituency.
- The accessibility for disabled persons to the probable polling stations within the polling place.

The ARO's for all Parliamentary Constituencies within East Hertfordshire will be consulted on the existing arrangements and representations will be invited from other relevant sources. These include elected members, local political parties and the general public, as well as organisations that have expertise in relation to access to premises for people with different forms of disability.

Defined Terms

¹ RPA 1983 Section 18A

² And / or such other method that the authority considered appropriate

A(RO): (Acting) Returning Officer is appointed by the Council as the proper officer with personal responsibility for Parliamentary elections and the Returning Officer personal responsibility for local elections.

Parliamentary constituencies: these cannot be changed by the review. The division of these constituencies into polling districts and places is the subject of this review.

Polling district: the area created by the division of a ward into smaller parts, within which a polling place can be determined which is convenient to electors.

Polling place: the building or area in which the (A)RO will select polling stations.

Polling station: the room or building where the poll takes place. Chosen by the (A)RO for the election and publicised on the Notice of Poll or the Notice of Situation of Polling Stations and communicated via poll card after the Notice of Election. The (A)RO must make a formal comment as part of this review both into the existing polling stations used and the polling stations that would probably be used based on any newly recommended polling places. The (A)RO must take account on how the size and layout would allow for the most effective throughput of electors. Each station must also enable voters to cast their vote in private and for staff to conduct the election in an efficient and effective manner without the secrecy of the ballot being compromised.

What is not being reviewed

The following are **not** covered by the review:

- The boundaries of UK parliamentary constituencies (this is subject to a separate review)
- The borders and names of local authorities and electoral areas within local authorities

Polling districts and places for local government elections are not automatically part of the review. RPA 1983 Sections 18A to 18E deal with parliamentary polling districts and places and require the 4 yearly review, whereas local government polling districts and places are covered by section 31 of the RPA 1983.

The Electoral Commission advises that reviews of parliamentary polling arrangements should always be conducted simultaneously with a review of local government arrangements. The polling districts and places for UK parliamentary and local government elections should always be the same.

By conducting this statutory review of polling places, local authorities must demonstrate that they have, as far as is practicable, met the criteria set out in legislation (RPA 1983 Section 18C and Schedule A1).

Relevant authorities must:

- (a) seek to ensure that all the electors in the constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances
- (b) seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable, the polling places they are responsible for are accessible to all electors, including those who are disabled, and when considering the designation of a polling place, must have regard to the accessibility needs of disabled persons (RPA 1983 Section 18B).

In an ideal world there would be a choice of a range of fully accessible buildings, conveniently located for the electors in the area. In practice however this is not always the case and there may be little choice available especially in certain areas which are predominately housing or very rural areas with little choice of community use buildings. If it is necessary to use a place where the access is not ideal then every reasonable adjustment would be undertaken to provide access for all electors.

It is good practice to continually review and monitor the suitability and availability of polling places. Prior to each election the (A)RO books and checks the availability of polling places and consults/notifies electors and interested political stakeholders accordingly. All polling places are also visited by the (A)RO and his staff on polling day checking suitability of the venue and polling staff complete questionnaires to highlight any problems or issues of possible concern and the results of these comments are included in this scheme.

The A(RO) constantly reviews the suitability of polling stations taking in to question planned new housing development and therefore potential new electors and hence the continued suitability of the current polling district, place and station.

The (A)RO will also vary the polling station as appropriate depending on the expected turnout for the election concerned, for example, a parliamentary election will attract a higher turnout so venues with 1,800 or more electors allocated to them may become double polling stations and we may use a different, larger room at the polling place. No polling station shall have more than 2,500 electors "voting in person" (i.e. ignoring postal voters) allocated to it.

Pre-review work

Outstanding polling issues

As part of a pre-review exercise, consideration has been given to reviewing some polling provision following the parliamentary election in 2017, to prevent any further ongoing issues and to improve the voter experience. Proposed alternative arrangements are set out in the scheme, following extensive consultation with local members.

This detailed work considered many aspects concerning venues, looking at:

- accessibility, availability & costs of venues
- facilities at venues (parking / lighting / facilities for staff etc)
- geography and topography of the local area (train lines/rivers/hills)
- distances travelled under current and proposed arrangements
- Presiding Officers' and Polling Station Inspectors' views of current venues
- information and views of East Herts' Electoral Services Team
- future and current housing developments (planning data)
- Electoral Commission guidance

Accessibility issues

Local authorities have a duty to review the accessibility of all polling places to ensure that every polling place, and respective polling station, for which it is responsible is accessible to disabled voters "so far as is reasonable and practicable".

Disability organisation SCOPE have identified some considerations which the (A)RO should be mindful of and this will help form training provided to polling staff to overcome any barriers to disabled voters and improve accessibility to all and an improved voting experience.

- Avoidance of steps/provision of ramps
- Narrow doorways/corridors
- Suitable space and secrecy for the elector
- Provision of low level polling booth or booths/tables
- Ballot box being provided at a lower level such as on a chair
- Clear provision of aids for visual impaired voters e.g. the tactile voting device
- Adequate lighting

Temporary polling stations

The council currently does not use any temporary polling stations (portakabins) though a number of council's (A)ROs do, due to the lack of any suitable available buildings that can be hired. The (A)RO does not intend to use any such temporary polling buildings in its proposals as these are very much a last resort as such buildings are very expensive; they require an additional separate WC block to be hired at further cost; and they do not provide an appropriate suitable voting experience as disability access is not ideal and there is concern for polling staff in regard to their health, safety and welfare. Typical costs per temporary building would be over £1,500, considerably higher than any other permanent building we currently use.

Schools

Wherever possible, schools are avoided, however, all schools that are publicly funded, including academies and free schools, can be used as polling stations free of charge and legislation allows the (A)RO to require a room in such schools for use as a polling station, in accordance with Rule 20 of the Principal Area Rules 2006. The (A)RO is also entitled to use free of charge any local authority funded room as a polling station. In a number of electoral areas the school is often the only public building suitable to hire and use. There is also a clear expectation from the Cabinet Office to use schools for national polls wherever possible in order to lessen the burden on the public purse. Whilst schools are not required to close on election days, from a logistical and for safeguarding reasons, many do. However, a number of schools do use Election Day as one of their teacher training days. We aim to work with the school to find the best facility within the school grounds for the public to vote from and at the same time cause the least disruption to the school so it can stay open – for example, a demountable classroom on the edge of the school grounds or associated nursery.

Moving away from schools does pose some problems. Schools are very often well positioned within the community and accessible from a disability point of view. Similarly, being publically funded buildings, schools are inexpensive to use at around £100 cost to the Returning Officer as the school can only charge for heating, lighting, caretaking costs, over and above the normal school day.

Housing building

East Herts planning officers have been consulted on proposed house building plans for the immediate future up to the next formal legal review taking place from 1 October 2023. Such comments are included in the proposed scheme.

The current main area of house building within the district is in the Bishop's Stortford area and new polling districts may well be required within this area and further changes will need to be made once further development is built.

We are proposing a step change within the Silverleys ward to re-draw the polling district boundary to equalize the current electorates for the BC and CB polling districts so removing the "doughnut" shape.

Proposed new polling district naming

The existing polling district prefixes to electoral registers has developed over time and is in need of review.

It is an opportune time with the creation of new polling districts as required in Bishop's Stortford to put in place a new naming system to come in to force when we republish a revised register of electors on 1 December 2019. The proposal is based on district wards to give some logic and meaning with the letters representing the ward name e.g. BSA – Bishop's Stortford All Saints. The polling districts within this ward would be denominated by a further letter A, B, C etc., so for example BSAA, BSAB, BSAC etc. This proposal will allow new polling districts to be easily created whilst keeping a logic and order.

The proposed naming scheme is attached **Appendix A** for comment.

The current scheme of polling places, districts and stations is attached as **Appendix B** and with a summary at **Appendix C**.

Consultation Period

We welcome all comments on this review, which will run from Friday 1 March 2019 until Friday 17 May 2019. All comments should be made in writing, or e-mailed to the address below by Friday 17 May 2019.

Should you wish to suggest alternative polling district arrangements or an alternative venue, please provide full details (as much as possible) of your suggested alternative arrangements ideally using the e-form available from our website.

Having considered all comments received in the eight week consultation period, formal changes to polling districts will not take effect until the publication of the revised register on 1 December 2019, following adoption of the revised scheme by the Council at its meeting to be held in October 2019. Minor changes to alternative more suitable polling stations will be trialled during the May 2019 elections (as appropriate) with any feedback received from the electorate, the Returning Officer's staff, candidates and elected officials used to help refine polling arrangements prior to formal approval by Council.

Both formal comments and further feedback from the May elections will be incorporated into any proposals and the outcomes of this review will be presented to the Council meeting in October 2019 for deliberation and approval.

Prior to the introduction of new venues we shall seek to maximise publicity of the changes, including displaying notices within the affected areas; adding these to our website and highlighting these on the poll cards.

All formal comments received during the consultation period will be published on our website, along with the reasons for amending polling district arrangements or choosing a particular polling place.

Philip Hardy, Electoral Services Manager (Interim)

Address for correspondence:

Electoral Services Manager
East Herts Council
Wallfields, Pegs Lane, Hertford SG13 8EQ

E-mail: electors@eastherts.gov.uk

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Appendix A

Proposed Naming Scheme

Appendix B

Scheme of polling districts, places and stations

Appendix C

Polling Scheme Summary (Current Provision)