

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2014

COMMENTS FROM THE ACTING RETURNING OFFICER

Introduction

(for ease of reference, the review of polling districts, polling places and polling stations will be collectively referred to as 'polling places' in this document).

1. The Acting Returning Officer (ARO) is responsible for the conduct of the elections for the two Parliamentary Constituencies which cover the Winchester District – namely the Winchester Constituency and the Meon Valley Constituency. The boundaries of those Constituencies extend to also cover parts of the Districts of Eastleigh (for Winchester Constituency) and East Hampshire and Havant (for Meon Valley Constituency).
2. The ARO will be responding to polling place review consultations from Eastleigh Borough, Havant Borough and East Hampshire District Councils, in respect of those polling stations which he uses for the above.
3. The following comments concentrate solely on the polling places which are located within the Winchester District. There has been no attempt to separate and examine the stations on a Constituency basis, because in the context of this review, it would serve no particular purpose. Likewise, polling districts are not discussed in detail, having regard to the information contained in 'Boundary Reviews' below.

Boundary Reviews

1. The Council is about to commence the process of reviewing its district ward boundaries, having made a recent recommendation to the Boundary Commission for England to reduce the number of Councillors from 57 to 45. The Commission will meet on 19 August 2014 to decide whether that number (or a different number) is appropriate for the Winchester District. Once that stage is completed, work on ward boundaries will commence and that exercise will conclude in June 2015.
2. Unfortunately, because legislation requires the Council to complete this polling places review by 31 January 2015, the final outcome of the boundaries review cannot be awaited. However, there is still a benefit in reviewing polling places now, because any agreed changes can be implemented for the General Election in May 2015.
3. Whilst mentioning the General Election, it should be recalled that in 2012 a review of Parliamentary Constituency boundaries was undertaken. Proposals were made to revise the Winchester Constituency and abolish the Meon Valley Constituency by dividing its area amongst adjoining constituencies. However, for political reasons, those proposals were never enacted and so the 2015 General Election will be contested on the current Constituency basis. The next review of Parliamentary boundaries is scheduled for 2018.

General Approach to the Polling Places Review

1. There are 83 polling places used for Parliamentary elections covering the Winchester District. Of those, one is a 'double station' due to location and number of electors (All Saints Church Hall, Denmead), meaning that the register is divided equally between two teams of polling staff working within the same building. Two stations (Jubilee Hall, Kings Worthy and Itchen Abbas & Avington Village Hall) serve two polling districts each, because of a lack of suitable buildings for polling stations in the adjoining areas. As with Denmead, two teams of polling staff operate within the same hall in each case, but work from completely separate registers in these instances.

2. At every election, Presiding Officers complete an assessment form which asks questions about the suitability of the premises as a polling place. Polling Station Inspectors also visit each location during polling day and report back on premises suitability. This has helped to highlight situations where additional measures are required, from the simple provision of more direction signs to the installation of ramps, or even a change of station. There were a few minor comments from the last elections on 22 May 2014 and these have already been taken into account.

3. To provide a straightforward system of rating, each polling place is graded 1-3 in terms of its overall suitability (1 being the most satisfactory). In assessing the gradings, a predominantly practical and realistic approach is taken to the buildings and facilities available. For the purposes of this review, the word 'disabled' has been used in the context of the practical issue of wheelchair access.

4. The gradings are defined as follows:-

- (a) Grade 1 – the polling place is conveniently located for the majority of electors, there is direct disabled access into the building/room used for polling, the room itself is suitable in terms of space, light etc and there are good facilities for staff.
- (b) Grade 2 – the polling place is good in most respects, but one or two of the elements set out for Grade 1 are adequate, rather than good. Disabled access can be achieved, although not always with the same ease as Grade 1 polling places (e.g. disabled access may be through a side door which, in some cases, can be made the main entrance for polling day).
- (c) Grade 3 – the polling place is less than adequate in most respects and may well only be used because of a lack of alternatives. Disabled access is either very difficult, poor, or not possible without major alterations.

5. In the parished areas in recent years, a number of the village halls which are used for polling places have been refurbished (some completely rebuilt) and so provide very good facilities. Permanent ramps have been constructed at some non-modernised halls, sometimes utilising a side door, because the steps and/or gradient at the front of the building cannot be changed at economic cost. The Council does provide temporary ramps, but as SCOPE (the disability group) point out, without proper assessment these ramps can be difficult to negotiate or even dangerous for wheelchair users. Therefore, only one is currently used - at Colden Common Pavilion.

5. Public houses are sometimes suggested as alternatives and, whilst these are often well situated and can offer reasonable access, some landlords do not welcome the disruption. Also, hire fees can be far more expensive than halls, because loss of trade is usually taken into the fee calculation. Notwithstanding these issues, local circumstances mean that three public houses are currently used as polling places in the District – the Ship Inn at Bishops Sutton, the March Hare at Harestock and the Tichborne Arms.

7. Another suggestion sometimes made is the use of portakabin type temporary buildings. These are rarely a practical alternative, because to achieve proper disabled access they need to be sizeable, which presents problems in finding a suitable location, plus the cost of hire is significant, as it will normally include a generator, chemical toilet and furniture (totalling over £1,000).

8. In the Winchester Town area, the standard of polling places is generally good and eight buildings owned by the City Council are used - seven are the community lounges of sheltered housing schemes and one is The Courtyard, Guildhall. Outside the Town, two Council sheltered housing schemes are used; one is Greens Close, Bishops Waltham and the other is Makins Court, Alresford. The only other Council owned premises used for polling in the District is the Meadowside Leisure Centre at Whiteley.

9. The Council currently does not need to use schools for polling places. All attempts are made to maintain this situation as, understandably, Head Teachers and parents do not welcome either the disruption of closing the whole school for a day, or the security issues which arise if one building/classroom is used for polling and the remainder of the school remains open. Whilst the Council could requisition schools for polling purposes and would not have to pay a hire fee, it is required to meet the costs of the caretaker, together with any additional security provisions which would no doubt be insisted upon by the Head Teacher if the school remained open. This means that there are unlikely to be any major cost savings when compared to using a village hall for example.

Representations made at the last Review

1. The last review was undertaken in 2011 and, at that time, there was only one polling place which was rated as Grade 3 - The Caravan at Itchen Stoke – used because there were no other suitable buildings in such a small village.

2. The caravan at Itchen Stoke was situated on the ‘village green’ and served an electorate of about 180. It was a small touring caravan with an awning, under which the polling station was set out; therefore access was quite literally at ground level. A portaloos was provided for staff. The problem with siting any kind of larger caravan or portakabin was that positioning and removal would almost certainly damage the green if conditions were wet and so some reinstatement works would be required. It was also very difficult to achieve proper disabled access with anything other than a very large portakabin.

3. Consequently, following local consultation, it was decided (as a trial) to move that polling station to Itchen Abbas & Avington Village Hall, which is a modern, sizeable building about one mile from Itchen Stoke along the B3047. It already served as a polling station for Itchen Abbas & Avington and was easily capable of accommodating a

second. Since that change (in 2012) no adverse representations have been received about the relocation and so it has become a permanent arrangement.

4. An issue often raised is the number of polling places created to serve the various smaller communities, which some people consider excessive and capable of amalgamation to save money (i.e. one central polling place to serve several parishes). It is a comment that has also been made in other contexts such as budgetary savings generally.

5. In response, there are two main points to consider. The first is that it is voter convenience and not cost which is the main driver of the review exercise. Of course, trying to achieve value for money is still very important, but judging from informal conversations with parish clerks for example, it should not be underestimated how much a polling station in the village is valued by local people. Making electors travel significant distances may well provoke an adverse reaction disproportionate to the possible savings.

6. Secondly, S18 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 requires that each parish has its own polling district and that the polling place should be within that polling district, unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate a polling place outside the district. It is the view of the ARO that such circumstances should normally be limited to situations where it is not possible to find a suitable building. If polling places were designated outside the parish, it would still be necessary to provide a split polling station for each parish within a larger venue. Therefore, no changes based solely on cost savings are proposed as part of this review, as geographical convenience to the voter is seen to be the most important factor.

Current Position

1. District, County, Police Commissioner and European elections have all been held during the past four years and, collectively, there have been very few adverse comments from voters, political parties or polling staff about the polling places used. Consequently, there has been far less need to relocate polling places (either permanently or temporarily) than during previous review periods.

2. Part of this has been due to coincidence, in the sense that there were a relatively high number of polling places affected by building works and improvements during 2007-2011, but these have long since been completed and that level of activity has not been replicated more recently. Secondly, the growth in the popularity of postal votes has been significant and it seems a reasonable assumption that many voters who (for whatever reason) had difficulty in accessing their local polling station – and therefore may have complained - have instead opted for the convenience of a postal vote.

3. The popularity of postal votes has also helped in relation to the Electoral Commission's guidance that a polling station should not cater for more than 2,500 electors, after postal voters have been deducted. The one station where this may have been a problem is Hyde Gate, Winchester with over 2,900 electors and not sufficient space to create a double station. But with over 500 postal voters to be deducted from that figure, the threshold is not exceeded.

4. The use of a room in the St Edburga block as a polling station at the University of Winchester (Sparkford Road) did result in critical comments from a few electors, who found it difficult to locate within the campus. With the co-operation of the University, the problem was resolved by significantly increasing the amount of directional signage, particularly when approaching from the Milnthorpe Lane direction.

5. Regarding the new major residential development at West of Waterlooville, a portakabin has been provided (part funded by the developer) for the emerging community; however, that facility only currently serves those new electors of Denmead Ward. Further phases have now become occupied which fall within Boarhunt & Southwick Ward and those new electors would need to go to Southwick to vote, unless a similar, more local arrangement can be made for them. One potential solution which will be investigated is whether the new school (Berewood – due to open in September 2014) may be suitable to act as a polling station for one or both sets of electors.

6. Similar large scale developments will occur north of Whiteley and at Barton Farm on the edge of Winchester Town. The electoral implications of this and other growth in housing numbers will form part of the deliberations on the forthcoming boundary review and will clearly have implications for future polling places in those areas.

7. The Acting Returning Officer will continue to monitor all these developments and make recommendations to change polling places as required.
