

Title: **Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places**

Portfolio Holder: **None**

Reporting Officer: **Nicola Mathiason**

---

### **Purpose**

To determine the outcome of a review of Polling Districts and Polling Places in respect of the Parliamentary Constituencies within the West Wiltshire District.

### **Background**

#### **Regulatory Background**

Councils are required to divide their areas into Polling Districts for the purpose of Parliamentary Elections and to designate Polling Places within these Districts.

The Electoral Administration Act 2006, Representation of the People Act 1983, and the Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Parliamentary Elections) Regulations 2006 require Councils to carry out a review of Polling Districts and Polling Places on a regular four-yearly cycle. The reason for the review is to ensure that all electors of the District have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable and to ensure that polling stations are accessible to all electors, including those with various forms of disability.

The review related to the Polling Districts and Polling Places used for the purpose of parliamentary elections for the two constituencies; Westbury and Devizes, (part). These Polling Districts and Polling Places are also used for District Council and other elections. In support of this requirement the Electoral Commission has published Circular EC28/2007 which is available on the Electoral Commission website; this was issued on the 26 June 2007.

The review was not to consider the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies; the borders and names of local authorities or the electoral areas within them; nor did it relate to the boundaries of Parish/Town Councils.

In conducting this review the Council was required to apply set criteria and thereby demonstrate that they have, as far as is practicable, sought to ensure that:

- all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances and

- so far as is reasonable and practicable, that Polling Places are accessible to all electors, including those who are disabled and, when considering the designation of Polling Places, have had regard to the accessibility needs of disabled persons.

Unless special circumstances exist each Parish is to be a separate Polling District.

## **Existing Arrangements**

The arrangements currently used for the conduct of elections have been developed over time and benefited from experience. Although no complaints were received about these arrangements during the conduct of the local elections this year it remained a statutory requirement, to conduct this review.

In order to facilitate the public consultation process and prior to it being commenced the two Acting Returning Officers in respect of the Parliamentary Constituencies were consulted as a preliminary step in the process to enable them to make representations relating to the location of Polling Stations (existing or proposed) within Polling Places (existing or proposed) relating to the constituencies for which they are responsible. The Returning Officer for District Council Elections (who is also the Parliamentary Acting Returning Officer for the Westbury Parliamentary Constituency) was been similarly consulted in that additional capacity.

The comments received from the Acting Returning Officer for the Parliamentary Constituency of Westbury and the West Wiltshire District Council were as follows:-

"West Wiltshire is currently made up of 114 polling districts. There are 81 venues that are used as either a single polling station or house multiple polling stations.

The recent District Ward boundary change in May 2007 required some polling districts to be altered and some new ones created.

All the polling station venues have either been adapted to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act or modifications are provided at the time of an election to meet these needs e.g. ramps.

Generally, the polling districts are of adequate electorate size. The polling stations are situated within the parish boundaries and are in reasonable locations to meet the needs of the electors for accessibility. The polling station facilities are also satisfactory to meet the needs of the polling staff with access to toilet and kitchen facilities.

There were no issues raised by the electorate at the May 2007 District and Parish elections with regards to polling districts and polling stations so I am content that the existing scheme in place is satisfactory.

However, on the polling district schedule I have commented on a few specific areas in Trowbridge, Westbury and Warminster (details of these comments are set out in the attached Appendix to this report). Although the polling stations are satisfactory, it would be preferable if an additional suitable venue was sought because of the number of electorate that are allocated to that venue.

I would, therefore welcome any suggestions for additional sites for those areas mentioned. I would also be interested in any other alternative sites for any area within West Wiltshire that the public may wish to put forward as a more suitable alternative or additional site".

The Acting Returning Officer for the Devizes Parliamentary Constituency stated that he had no comments to make as part of the review.

### **The Consultation Process**

As each Parish and Town Council have local direct knowledge of their local Polling Districts and Polling Places they were all directly engaged by letter in the consultation process in addition to the publication of a notice in the Wiltshire Times on the 12 October and at the Council Offices at Bradley Road.

By this process representations and comments were invited from Parish and Town Councils, electors, elected persons, local political parties, local community groups and persons/organisations with particular expertise in relation to access to premises for people with different forms of disability.

Responses were invited in writing and also electronically to an email address set up specifically for this purpose at [pdreview@westwiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:pdreview@westwiltshire.gov.uk)

The Parish and Town Councils were provided with an Appendix which contained information relating to the whole District from which they were able to identify the arrangements that relate to their specific area.

Similarly information identifying the current arrangements in respect of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations was also available for inspection at the Council Offices, Bradley Road and could be viewed on the Council website.

Additionally the responses received from the two Acting Parliamentary Returning Officers were also disclosed as part of the consultation exercise.

In the event that anyone responding to the consultation process was of the opinion that the current arrangements are not appropriate they were asked to identify in their response alternative arrangements that were considered to be appropriate based on a consideration of the criteria set out above.

### **Timetable**

The statutory timescale within which the review was to be conducted requires that it be completed before 31 December 2007. However there is another statutory requirement to publish the Register of Electors by the 1 December 2007. If this review is not completed by the 1 December it will be necessary to publish a second Electoral Register after 1 December but before 31 December 2007. In those rather constrained circumstances consultation responses were requested by the 9 November in order for Council to consider this report at this meeting.

## Consultation Response

A response was received from Warminster Town Council in which they commented on the lack of venues in the Warminster West Ward. These are issues that are known, were identified in the response from the Acting Parliamentary Returning Officer and as contained in the attached Appendix.

Additional venues at Warminster Assembly Rooms, the Athenaeum Theatre, Princecroft School, the Minster School and at Medicott House were suggested. These have been evaluated and the following issues relate to them.

Warminster Assembly Rooms. This is a central venue but availability is restricted due to pre-booked functions. There is a charge for car parking which is free at the current venue at the cricket club that is only a short distance away.

The Athenaeum Theatre. There is no parking available and the room that could be used for election purposes is on the second floor and there is no lift available. Availability is also restricted due to pre-booked functions.

Princecroft School. This could only be available at times when the school is not in session. Enquiries have also been made about the availability of the former caretaker's bungalow but this is used for storage.

Minster School. This could also only be used when the school is not in session.

Medicott House. There is some though limited parking. The use of the lounge at this venue is restricted in that there must be no disruption of the residents in any way which would be difficult to guarantee.

It is proposed not to take up any of these suggestions as they do not achieve the accessibility standards normally expected for polling stations in this area.

**Effect on Codes and Strategies:** This review is complimentary to the aspiration in the Corporate Plan to encourage more people to vote in local elections.

**Risk Management Implications:** Inadequate facilities would potentially reduce turnout, fail to comply with the disability discrimination act and impact on the reputation of the Council.

**Finance and Performance Implications:** These are set out in the background section on regulatory matters.

**Legal and Human Rights Implications:** None

**Next Steps:** To conclude the review, publish the Electoral Register and the details relating to the conduct of this review and the outcome.

**Recommendations:**

(a) To note the arrangements adopted for the conduct of this review together with the details of the content of the consultation responses and comments on the proposals presented.

(b) To determine not to make any changes to the current arrangements for Polling Districts and Polling Places.