

# REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS, POLLING PLACES AND POLLING STATIONS

REPORT BY: THE RETURNING OFFICER

CABINET

13 DECEMBER 2007

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## Wards Affected

County-wide

## Purpose

To make comment on the proposed changes to the number and locations of polling stations in Herefordshire.

## Key Decision

This is a Key Decision because it is likely to be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in Herefordshire in an area comprising one or more wards.

It was not included in the Forward Plan however inclusion in the agenda gives the required notice in accordance with Section 15 of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) Regulations 2000.

## Recommendation

THAT

- (a) **the existing arrangement of polling districts and polling places remain unchanged; and**
- (b) **the Returning Officer's recommendations as indicated in Appendix 2 (Changes to Polling Stations) and Appendix 3 (No changes to Polling Stations) be approved.**

## Reasons

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 (EAA 2006) requires that relevant authorities conduct a review of all polling districts and polling places by the end of 2007 and that a further review be conducted every four years thereafter.

The Returning Officer must make representations to the relevant authority as to the location of existing or proposed stations.

The authority must publish the Returning Officer's comments within 30 days of receipt.

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Further information on the subject of this report is available from  
C Maund or J Rochefort on 01432 260110/0733

## Considerations

1. Legislation requires the authority to carry out a review of all polling districts/polling places within Herefordshire. The law requires that all electors must have reasonable facilities to be able to vote and those venues chosen must be accessible for all electors including those with disabilities.

For the purposes of elections, areas within a parliamentary constituency are divided up into polling districts, polling places and polling stations.

- A polling district is a geographical sub-division of an electoral area such as a parliamentary constituency. In England, each parish should be in a separate polling district.
  - A polling place is a geographical area or building in which a polling station will be selected by the Returning Officer.
  - A polling station is the room or building where the poll takes place.
2. Herefordshire is a very rural area with over 200 parishes. Some of these parishes operate as groups. There is some sympathy with the view that it would be easier to deal with these as a single entity, however legislation requires that elections are organised per individual parish. Should parishes or group parishes wish to have their parish boundaries re-examined, the authority could consider such proposals under a separate process.
  3. At present Herefordshire has 168 registered polling stations.
    - a) Many polling stations serve small or very small numbers of electorate.
    - b) Some polling stations do not have adequate facilities for either electorate or staff e.g. inadequate disabled access, toilets or kitchens.
    - c) The costs of using polling stations:
      - 1 Presiding Officer and at least 1 Poll Clerk = £310
      - Travel expenses @ 40p per mile
      - Hire of venue – from £20 - £300 +

At present these costs are borne in part by each parish that uses a particular polling station. The authority could choose to maintain and fund existing polling stations but would need to consider the cost implications that such a decision would have on its budget.

- d) There has been an increasing difficulty in finding staff to cover polling stations in very rural areas particularly in the south of the county. However by involving Human Resources, efforts are being made to encourage more staff to take an active interest in local democracy.
- e) Some polling stations serve two or more wards requiring two or more ballot boxes. This has led to electorate confusion, staff confusion and difficulties at the count. The proposals endeavour to assign electorate to polling stations within their ward.

- f) Postal voting has been available, on application, to all registered electorate since 2001, providing a viable and environmentally friendly alternative to using a polling station. In the 2003 local government elections, Herefordshire undertook an all postal voting pilot. This proved to be very successful and resulted in a 60.72% turnout for the council. Government legislation, brought in at the last minute, had a serious and negative impact on postal voting for 3rd May, 2007 elections. The authority acknowledges that this has undermined public confidence in postal voting and is putting in place strategies to address these issues. These include a concerted communication campaign to encourage postal voting as a secure and simple method by which the electorate can exercise its democratic right.
  - g) Some areas such as Shrewsbury and Atcham, have run successful pilots in electronic voting (e-voting). These types of pilots are authorised by government. If further pilots in e-voting are proposed, the authority should consider making an application as another way of encouraging voter participation in elections.
  - h) Candidates will be encouraged to take a more pro-active role in future elections as a way of raising voter turn out. To this end the Electoral Registration Office will produce a campaign leaflet for candidates suggesting ways of reaching out to electors whilst remaining within the legislation. In particular candidates will be encouraged to offer assistance to voters who wish to vote at polling stations.
4. The review commenced in July with a questionnaire sent out to all existing polling station venues to establish the level of their facilities and accessibility. Responses varied in the quality of information returned. Some venues no longer wished to be used, some were unclear regarding access, some were undergoing renovation and several did not respond at all. Information received in response to the questionnaire is set out in Appendix 4.
  5. The second stage of the review set out to examine in greater detail those polling stations that had low numbers of electorate. A list of polling stations servicing 300 or less electorate was created and this is attached at Appendix 5. This includes details of eligible voters, number of postal voters, number of voters in the 2007 election, percentage of turnout and an example of cost per voter.
  6. A set of proposals was made based on this list plus other requests to review specific polling stations. These proposals were sent out to the Consultees listed below on 1st October, 2007. The proposals were also made available on the Council website and at the Electoral Registration Office and the Info Shops. The consultation period ended on 31st October, 2007.
  7. Responses to the proposals were received from MPs, Members, Parish Clerks and Parishioners and details of these responses are set out in Appendix 1. Based on the responses received the proposals have been revised and are attached to this report at Appendix 2 and 3. Appendix 2 sets out the wards where changes to polling stations are proposed. The criteria used when making these proposals is as follows:

- Polling Stations that service 300 or fewer electors
- Polling Stations about which complaints have been made
- Polling Stations venues that no longer wish to be used
- Polling Stations that are located outside the ward area of the electorate that use them
- Polling Stations that split electoral registers

The rationale used when making these proposals is as follows:

- Since 2001 all registered electors are entitled to have a postal vote without giving a reason for the request
- Some Polling Stations do not have adequate facilities for either electorate or staff e.g. disabled accessibility, parking etc.
- Costs of Polling Station – 1 Presiding Officer and at least 1 Poll Clerk ; Hire cost of the Polling Station; travel expenses to rural areas
- Difficulty of finding staff to cover very rural areas
- Problems where Polling Stations cover 2 or more wards – electorate confusion; staff confusion; extra staffing costs.

For ease of reference the appendix is set out in the following format:

- Ward name
- Current situation of Polling Stations
- The initial proposal that was sent out for consultation
- The recommendations now proposed taking into account any representations made
- The reasons for the recommendations
- Number of postal voters

Appendix 3 sets out the wards where there are no changes proposed to the polling stations.

## **Risk Management**

That electors refuse to use new polling places and do not apply for postal voting as an option thus decreasing the turnout at elections. This is a reputational risk for the Council as it should endeavour to achieve a significant electorate turn out for local government elections.

## **Alternative Options**

There are no Alternative Options. The review is required by legislation.

## **Consultees**

Unitary Councillors

Parish Councils

Bill Wiggin MP

Paul Keetch MP

Hereford Conservatives

Hereford Access for All

Hereford Stroke Club

Leominster Shop Mobility

Aspire/Choices

Cordless Club

North Herefordshire Conservative Association	Scope
Hereford Constituency Labour Party	Herefordshire Headway
Leominster Constituency Labour Party	Herefordshire Mencap
Hereford Liberal Democrats	Herefordshire Service Users
Leominster Liberal Democrats	Age Concern
Hereford Constituency Green Party	Deaf Direct
Leominster Constituency Green Party	ECHO
Hereford Constituency UKIP Party	People's Union
Leominster Constituency UKIP Party	RNIB
Workmatch Ltd	Community Voluntary Action

## **Appendices**

1. Responses to Proposals for Polling Stations.
2. Recommendations – Wards with changes to Polling Stations
- 3, Recommendations – Wards with no changes to Polling Stations.
4. Responses to Polling Station Questionnaire
5. List of Polling Stations with 300 or less electorate.

## **Background Papers**

1. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 (EAA 2006)