

| <b>Periodic Review of North Norfolk District Polling Districts and Polling Places 2024</b> |   |
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| <b>Executive Summary</b>   | <p>The District Council is required to undertake a formal review of polling districts and polling places in its area at least once every five years.</p> <p>The proposals detailed in this report are considered to offer the best arrangements in terms of polling districts and polling places currently available within the district.</p> <p>The report sets out changes that have been proposed through the review process and also details some other areas where there will be no change in designation but where other issues have been raised and considered and, as far as possible, addressed through the review process</p> |
| <b>Options considered</b>  | Looking at alternative locations for polling stations in polling districts where alternative premises exist.  |
| <b>Consultation(s)</b>   | Consultations with Parish Councils, elected members and several local groups in terms of polling station accessibility for electors with mobility issues or disabilities.   |
| <b>Recommendations</b>   | <p>Full Council is recommended to:-</p> <p>Approve the list of Polling Districts and Polling Places within the North Norfolk District following this periodic review as detailed in Appendix 1 to this report.</p> <p>Council should note that in exceptional circumstances (such as a polling place becoming unavailable) changes can be made to polling place designations between periodic reviews</p>   |
| <b>Reasons for recommendations</b>   | These recommendations are made and considered to be the best locations within local communities to be designated as polling places which will provide for electors the most convenient and accessible polling arrangements.   |
| <b>Background papers</b>   | Comments made during the consultation and the schedule of proposals.  |

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| <b>Wards affected</b>    | All North Norfolk District Council Wards  |
| <b>Cabinet member(s)</b> | Tim Adams, Leader of the Council  |
| <b>Contact Officer</b>   | Rob Henry, Senior Elections Officer & Steve Blatch, Chief Executive and Returning Officer |

| <b>Links to key documents:</b> |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Corporate Plan:                | N/A |

|                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) | N/A |
| Council Policies & Strategies         | N/A |

| <b>Corporate Governance:</b>                       |   |
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| Is this a key decision                             | Yes   |
| Has the public interest test been applied          | This is a periodic review of polling places and districts. Consultation has been conducted with all Town and Parish Councils in the district with a small number of responses received. |
| Details of any previous decision(s) on this matter | Not Applicable  |

## **1. Purpose of the report**

- 1.1 The Authority is required to undertake a compulsory review of its polling districts and polling places in accordance with Section 17 of the Electoral Administration Act 2013.

## **2. Introduction & Background**

- 2.1 The review requires us to consider the suitability of the polling stations used throughout the district at the time of an election to ensure their ongoing suitability and accessibility following the implementation of the Elections Act 2021.
- 2.2 Proposals have been made by the (Acting) Returning Officer and these have been consulted on with Parish Councils, current District and County members, as well as groups who support members of the community with various disabilities.
- 2.3 Further changes and amendments to Polling Districts and Polling Places can be made outside of a compulsory periodic review should the need arise.

## **3. Proposals and Options**

- 3.1. As part of this review consideration has been given to existing polling place arrangements that have been in place for a number of years and in a small number of locations where alternative arrangements have had to be implemented due to designated polling place having a change in circumstances or no longer being available.
- 3.2. There are a small number of examples where an arrangement which has been used on a temporary basis is now seen more appropriate as a permanent arrangement and the recommendation is to designate the “new” polling place for the polling district going forward.

- 3.3. A full interim review of the district was carried out by Electoral Services in 2022 because of issues experienced during the 2021 Police and Crime Commissioner and County Council elections conducted during the COVID pandemic where some suggestions were made in terms of improved accessibility to some polling places, however, considering North Norfolk is a vastly rural district the vast majority of polling stations used are village and community halls and are therefore considered to provide accessible polling arrangements for the majority of electors.
- 3.4. The following changes of previous temporary arrangements have been proposed by the Acting Returning Officer following this review:

#### **3.4.1. Holkham Parish (WH1)**

The Ancient House, Park Road, Holkham is proposed as the designated polling place for the Holkham parish (WH1 polling district) having been successfully used on a trial basis over the two most recent elections. The former designated polling place at The Victoria Hotel is no longer available following a change of use of the Residents Lounge and the Holkham Estate are keen to retain a location within the parish and have continued to kindly offer an alternative place for parish polling. A representation was received from Holkham Parish Council which supported this proposal.

#### **3.4.2. Kelling Parish (CO3)**

The previously designated polling place at Beck House, Kelling is no longer available for use and over the past three elections use has been made of The Old Reading Room café and gallery in the village. There are no other alternatives within the parish and this arrangement has worked well on the occasions it has been used so is now proposed for designation as the polling place for the Kelling (CO3) polling district in the future. No comments or alternative proposals were received.

#### **3.4.3. Sustead (ER8)**

During the initial consultation period, representation was received from Sustead, Bessingham and Metton Parish Council advising that Sustead Village Hall was back under their control (having been previously used as a business premises) and was in the final stages of renovation and that it would be their wish for it to be used as the polling place for the ER8 polling district in the future. A visit has been undertaken by the Electoral Services Team and following the completion of the remaining renovations it is considered that the village hall will provide for a suitable and accessible polling place. The revised ARO proposal is therefore to redesignate Sustead Village Hall, Aylmerton Road, Sustead as the polling place for the ER8 polling district for future elections rather than Hanworth Village Hall in the adjoining polling district.

#### **3.4.4. Thursford (PR7)**

As part of the review it was considered that the existing arrangement at Thursford Methodist Church was no longer suitable as for designation as a polling place as the venue didn't provide for a good polling

experience, in terms of its condition, lighting, comfort for staff and accessibility. Earlier this year the Electoral Services Team were also informed that the premises is no longer available for hire, so for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May and the Parliamentary Election in July use was made of the Garden Pavilion at the Thursford Collection. Positive feedback was received from the two elections where this premises has been used so it is proposed that this location is designated as the polling place for the Thursford parish PR7 polling district going forward with the understanding that should an election fall within the late autumn or winter period when the venue is heavily used as part of the Thursford Collection's Christmas events, an alternative venue will need to be sought, with this likely being St Andrews Parish Church.

#### **3.4.5. Wighton (PR9)**

Following the demolition of the formerly designated Wighton Recreation Hut, electors within the PR9 Wighton parish polling district had to vote in person at the Reading Room, Warham in the neighbouring Warham polling district. In the elections held this year, polling has returned to the new Village Hall in Wighton which occupies the site of the former Recreation Hut and this premises is now proposed as the designation as the polling place for the parish for future elections.

### **3.5. Other issues raised through this review:**

#### **3.5.1 North Walsham Town Centre East and West (NWX1 & NWX2) polling districts**

Comments were received from the elected member for the North Walsham East County Division and the District Council's North Walsham West ward which stated that residents in the furthest points of these polling district could be adversely affected in terms of accessing the Sacred Heart polling place particularly if they had limited mobility as access to the polling place on foot was difficult involving the need to cross a busy junction and the route along Kings Arms Street having narrow pavements.

Having considered the comments and looked at possible alternatives it is deemed that the existing arrangement at the Sacred Heart Church Hall, which has car parking, good facilities and access arrangements in to the building, and being large enough to accommodate electors from both polling districts, (and which following the Norfolk County Council Division boundary review are both situated in the new North Walsham East Division, that this should be retained as the designated polling district for both parish wards going forward.

It is considered that those from the far-reaching points within the polling district would travel into the town centre to conduct many of their daily activities in terms of shopping, health or social visits and given the accessibility of the Sacred Heart Church Hall they would be well supported by polling staff if they did have any additional needs. For those who are unable to travel, the Electoral Services Team could assist with arranging for an absent vote should that be required.

In terms of voter safety, Police Slow signs are requested to be put into place at district wide elections so those accessing the polling place on foot along Kings Arms Street can do so safely.

### **3.5.2. Tunstead (HT8)**

At the Parliamentary Election held on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> July 2024, a decision was made to not use the designated polling place of the Horse and Groom public house for the Tunstead (HT8) polling district because of a number of issues experienced with the polling place at previous elections. Electors from the Tunstead polling district were therefore advised in advance of the election that they would need to vote at the Preston Rooms in Ashmanhaugh (adjoining polling district) at that election. This decision had to be made quickly due to the short lead in times for the production of poll cards ahead of the General Election.

This decision was not supported by Tunstead Parish Council who wished for polling to be retained within the Parish and comment was made at the time through the Acting Returning Officer that the issues involved could be considered further through this scheduled periodic review. Tunstead Parish Council have therefore submitted a representation through this consultation stating they objected to the arrangements adopted at the Parliamentary Election and want the Horse and Groom to continue to be used as the designated polling place for the Tunstead polling district moving forward.

The Electoral Services Team have therefore asked that the Council's Health and Safety Officer, who has worked as both a Presiding Officer and more recently, a Polling Station Inspector, to undertake an independent assessment of the Horse and Groom public house for use as a polling place/ station during which he also met with both the new owner and manager of the public house and a member of Tunstead Parish. At that visit, it was established that with some additional measures, such as the removal of the pool table, provision of basic kitchen facilities, the proposed renovation of a nearby toilet and sink and also the closing off of the doorway (on election days) to the bar area (except if required to assist disabled voters), that the Horse and Groom would be retained as the designated polling place for the Tunstead (HT8) polling district at future elections, with an evaluation taking place following the next election which is to be held on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2025.

### **3.5.3. Walsingham (Great WA3 & Little WA5)**

The designated polling place for the WA3 (Great Walsingham) and WA5 (Little Walsingham) polling districts) is Walsingham Village Hall. However, the village hall suffered from extensive fire damage in January 2023 and is therefore currently out of use, during which time use has been made of the Parish Hall, situated on the High Street, for polling purposes. This premises has been used successfully for the past three elections although it has no parking which is considered to be an issue particularly because of the large area covered by the WA3 polling district meaning that many electors would travel to vote by car. However, in the absence of any other suitable alternative premises it is proposed that use will continue to be made of the Parish Hall for election

purposes until the Village Hall is rebuilt. It is therefore proposed to retain Walsingham Village Hall as the designated polling place for the WA3 and WA5 polling districts, but continue to use the Parish Hall for elections for the intervening period.,

#### 4. Financial and Resource Implications

##### Comments from the S151 Officer:

*The S151 Officer (or member of the Finance team on their behalf) will complete this section.*

##### Comments from the Monitoring Officer

*The Monitoring Officer (or member of the Legal team on behalf of the MO) will complete this section. They will outline any legal advice provided.*

#### 5. Risks

- 5.1. The District Council is required to undertake periodic reviews of polling districts and places in its area and the risk of not maintaining a list of designated polling stations is that there could be issues of access which could affect the experience of voters at an election meaning we would not be complying with measures detailed in the Elections Act 2022.

#### 6. Net ZeroTarget

- 6.1 There are no Net Zero implications from this report – the provisions of the Elections Act require polling places to be designated within local communities to ensure that electors are able to cast their vote easily at an accessible location within their immediate neighbourhood or locality. The rural nature of North Norfolk with its dispersed settlement pattern means that many electors would need to travel to their local polling place by personal transport, but for the majority of electors this would mean a journey shorter than many people undertake for work or essential everyday living in terms of accessing shops, post offices, school or medical appointments.

#### 7. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

- 7.1. The need to undertake a regular review of polling places is to ensure that the premises used for elections allow for inclusive access so that electors are able to cast their vote in their local polling station should they wish to do so.
- 7.2. North Norfolk is an extensive rural district with many “small” village and hamlet communities meaning that there is not always a wide choice of accessible premises to facilitate voting so, where required, Presiding Officers are instructed to assist any voter who requires additional help to cast their vote should they need it.

## **8. Community Safety issues**

- 8.1. The Electoral Services Team liaises with Norfolk Constabulary ahead of each district-wide election and identifies locations where further measures may be required to enable voters to attend their polling stations safely, including the provision of traffic cones, Police Slow notices etc in locations where forward visibility on busy roads / junctions are believed to exist and where pedestrian movements on election days might be larger than at other times such as Felbrigg; Kings Arms Street, North Walsham and Merchants Place in Cromer.
- 8.2. The Electoral Services Team also provides additional lighting where required to polling stations where outside areas are not sufficiently well lit – again to improve the experience of voters.

## **9. Conclusion and Recommendations**

- 9.1. As stated in the report, given that North Norfolk is a large rural area, it has a limited number of suitable premises to serve as polling places within some parishes. However, through conducting this review it is considered that the polling places designated provide good premises for elections within our polling districts and where it has not been possible to provide a polling place within a polling district, we have considered the best nearby alternative.
- 9.2. The limited response received to the consultation suggests that most communities believe that the existing designated polling places are suitable venues for polling; with only two communities Sustead (ER8) and Tunstead (HT8) requesting that polling places be returned to or retained in their polling districts – both of which are proposed for endorsement through this report and recommendation to Full Council.
- 9.3. The designations as seen in Appendix 1, the matrix of ARO proposals following consultation are recommended to Full Council for adoption and will be in place for the Norfolk County Council elections being held on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2025.

**Full Council is therefore recommended to:-**

**Approve the list of Polling Districts and Polling Places within the North Norfolk District following this periodic review as detailed in Appendix 1 to this report.**