

Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places Responses to Consultation

Councillor C Ellis

Can I pose couple of questions

1. presumably the Head teachers concerned where it's a school will get written to and invited to comment yes?
2. Is there a simple set of bullet points to refer to for what makes a suitable polling place so I can see what suggestions might be made re alternative for North Town to save the school from having to close? .
3. Is there any block on using part of Deane House for North Town since it's good location and accessible or can that go in the mix?

Councillor J Lloyd

The Northfield Centre in Wellington has now closed. Wellington Library are moving there for 12 months while the current library is renovated, after that, the future of the building is uncertain.

Wellington Football Club is approx 50 yards away from the Northfield Centre and has a large room but it is on the other side of the road so I am not sure if that would be suitable and/or whether the club would be willing for it to be used as a polling station.

Councillor K Wheatley

It is a total waste of council manpower and other resources to have voting at the Baptist Church, Arts Centre and Bulford Hall. A 400m radius would cover all three venues. The church is easily big enough to cope with extra volumes of voters and should be the single polling station.

Response: Thank you for your response. Although I understand your comments, unfortunately we are not permitted to mix different elections in the same polling station, we have separate polling stations for each Parish Ward/Unitary Division. For example, Wellington East Ward votes in a different room at the Baptist Church to Wellington South East Ward. This is to prevent ballot papers being issued incorrectly.

Thanks for the explanation. Some of our electoral rules and procedures are beginning to look prehistoric but I do understand that you have no flexibility in these areas.

Parish Councillor F Schott

I am writing to you as Chair of the Exmoor Parish Council to say I was alarmed to hear that there are plans to make Simonsbath voters travel, possibly all the way to Exford Village Hall, to vote in future.

Simonsbath, apart from having disabled parishioners, has an ageing population and forcing them to travel anywhere, even the 5 miles to Exford, is likely to mean a large proportion just won't bother to vote!

Therefore, I feel that the decision reached in the Community Governance Review by the Election Committee on behalf of Somerset West and Taunton Council, apart from being disenfranchising, could be construed locally as being discriminatory.

I believe the pretext for this decision is because the current venue, Simonsbath House Hotel, is considered to be unsuitable for disabled voters.

There are several alternative venues available in Simonsbath, which would meet all the criteria for any disabled voters and enable them to cast their votes safely. For example, White Rock Cottage (Simonsbath Old School), Boevey's Tea Rooms or the entrance hall of The Exmoor Forest Inn would all be suitable sites.

Using any of these venues in future would mean that all the voters in Simonsbath could continue to vote in the village with the minimum of disruption to their everyday lives.

I hope, based on the above information, that you will reconsider your decision to make Simonsbath voters travel out of the village to cast their votes in future.

Response: Thank you so much for responding to our polling district review. I am very grateful for the suggested alternatives as I would prefer to keep a polling station within the Parish. I will investigate them and hopefully find a suitable outcome.

Thank you for responding to my email so quickly.

I am delighted to hear that you would prefer to keep the Polling Station within the Parish.

For what it's worth, of the possible listed alternatives to Simonsbath House Hotel, the Parish Council feels that White Rock Cottage (Simonsbath Old School) would probably be the best new venue.

I look forward to hearing from you once you have completed your investigations.

Councillor S Pugsley

Many thanks for the polling station review documents.

I would wish to state in the strongest possible terms that in the remote communities of Exmoor it is extremely important that polling stations are reasonably accessible and that we do everything feasible to facilitate the ability to participate in the democratic process. Therefore, Hawkridge should retain a polling station, rather than residents be expected to make the at-least 4 mile journey to Withypool, and that if the Simonsbath House Hotel is no longer deemed suitable for voting then an alternative should be found in the parish of Exmoor rather than forcing residents to go all the way to Exford.

Response: Francis Schott has kindly responded regarding Exmoor and has suggested some alternative venues, One of her suggestions (and the favourite of the Parish Council) is White Rocks Cottage (Simonsbath Old School) and, having looked in up, I see that you are the Chairman of the Simonsbath and Exmoor Heritage Trust.

Please can you tell me if this building is available to hire as a polling station and who I need to contact to book it?

I also note your comments about Hawkridge, I think the main issue is the cost of providing the polling station for just 39 electors (10 of which are already postal voters).

Thanks so much. Francis Schott handles the bookings for the Old School at Simonsbath so in the first instance he is the best person to contact. I am sure there will be no problem in hiring it as a polling station.

As to Hawkridge, I know that you and I have discussed it over the years - as a point of principle, I would always argue that democracy comes with a cost and we should be prepared to pay it (even for 39 electors). Hawkridge is a distinct remote community, with no discernible public transport, so the 4 miles to a polling station at Withypool will be a difficulty if not impossibility for some. I think it should be an expectation that you can exercise your right to vote in person rather than being made to do it by post.

Rebecca Tomalin, Clerk to Withypool and Hawkridge Parish Council

I am writing as Parish Clerk of Withypool & Hawkridge Parish Council to say how alarmed the Parish Council is that the polling station at Hawkridge may be closed.

Hawkridge has an ageing population and forcing them to travel anywhere, even four miles to Withypool Village Hall is likely to be met with resistance and probably they will just not bother to vote at all!

In the current environment of equality it seems rather discriminatory to take away this choice for many long serving members of the community who have always voted in the village hall and know no other way to cast their votes.

The Parish Council would be happy to discuss the reasons for the potential closure with Somerset West and Taunton Council so that we may work together to ensure that Hawkridge parishioners may continue to vote in the most convenient place for them.