

Response from the Returning Officer to the Review of Polling Areas and Polling Places.

I am pleased to submit my responses as Returning Officer for The Borough of Newcastle under Lyme and as Acting Returning Officer for the Parliamentary Constituency of Newcastle under Lyme.

As you will be aware, during recent elections I have visited all of the Polling Stations. I am also aware that you keep this matter under review and that as a result of this in general we have polling districts and places which are proportionate for the current geographical distribution of the electorate and that polling stations are located in a geographically central location of these.

I also confirm that in general polling stations have been selected which conform to the best practices of being convenient and accessible for the electorate. However, my most recent round of polling station visits has confirmed certain cases where I consider reassessment should be made. Specifically these are:

The dance studio at Loggerheads is a facility not well suited to use as a polling station owing to the poor level of natural light and I would recommend use of my power as Returning Officer to require the school which was formerly used as a polling station be reinstated.

Newcastle Golf Club is in most regards a suitable polling station but is not as preferable as Newcastle Community High School. I would recommend use of my power as Returning Officer to require the school which was formerly used as the polling station to be reinstated as the polling station.

Following the Baptist Church Hall being put up for sale we relocated the polling station to the Scout Hut off Grosvenor Road. I would wish to recommend that we monitor this situation and seek to negotiate access to the Church Hall on London Road with the new owner provided that its future use is appropriate. In the meantime I would request that we consider alternative locations for this polling station and that if this is not possible that additional signage be provided to ensure that electors unfamiliar with the vicinity can identify the location of the Scout Hut.

You are aware of the measure which I have taken as Returning Officer to keep to a minimum the use of mobile units. I am pleased that by working with a number of other venues we have been able to reduce by half the number of mobile units now in use. I have considered carefully and discussed with the relevant Presiding Officers and my staff the three remaining mobile units. I am satisfied that there are not alternative build facilities which we can use as viable polling stations in these polling places. Of the three units the nature of the topography at Moreton Close means that access to the mobile unit by people having limited mobility remains a challenge. However, I would request that these locations are kept under review and should new facilities become

available which meet the criteria of accessibility, that these are considered as alternatives to mobile units. The mobile unit at the co-operative store, Barbridge Road is considered by the staff and public to be a conveniently sited polling station and that this outweighs the marginal inconvenience of a mobile over a fixed premises facility.

As you will be aware I have considered using my statutory power to require a polling station at Wolstanton High School. With the support of officers at the County Council we have worked with the school and on this basis have used The Lodge. I am aware that the location of this polling station is not ideal as it is located outside the polling area and access is made more complicated by its proximity to the main school gate and the related parking restrictions. It would be my strong desire to find a polling station within the polling area, but I am aware that efforts on the part of you and your staff and local councillors have not come up with a suitable alternative. Prior to our use of The Lodge the polling station was located in a portakabin located on Wolstanton Marsh. My comments above regarding portakabins apply but in this case the situation was made worse by the portakabin being located outside the polling area. Having looked at the geography of the polling area it is evident that it is an area predominately of housing and seems not to contain venues within it which might be considered as polling stations. I would urge that we keep this matter under review with the objective of securing a polling station within the polling area, even if this is a portakabin, but ideally of finding a suitable building. I would request that we again make a call in that community for any local knowledge of potentially suitable venues.

I would like to make some observations in regard to certain specific polling stations which have been reviewed during my period as Returning Officer.

We have considered at length the polling station to serve the 00002 electoral area of the Keele Ward. In view of the size of the catchment voter population and the importance of promoting electoral turnout amongst the student population it is desirable that this polling place be retained on the Keele University campus. I have discussed that matter with the Vice Chancellor on a number of occasions and he has been supportive of the actions we have taken to secure a polling station tailored not only to the student population but to staff and others living on the campus and to the off-campus population also served by this polling station. At the May 2014 election we located the polling station in the Student Union building. This is the venue used for the student elections which take place at Keele University and therefore has an existing association and identity with the electoral process. The venue is centrally located on the campus, has level access and is also accessed without the need for voters to pass through the reception of the building. The University authorities were kind enough to designate an area for parking directly across from the access point and to permit use of the drop off point located adjacent to the access ramp. I recommend that with the support of the Vice Chancellor that this be retained as the polling station.

At the May 2014 elections we re-located the polling station M0004 in the Silverdale and Parkside Ward to the Kents lane Community Building. This is a

new facility and is built to the current building regulations meaning it meets relevant accessibility requirements. This polling station is better located within the polling district to take account of recent new developments and it was notable that turnout at this station was higher than in previous years. I would recommend that this be retained as the polling station.

I would also wish to make an observation regarding the use of venues which are linked to places of worship.

We use a number of venues as polling stations which are linked to places of worship. In the vast majority of cases we use the non-consecrated areas of these venues. It is important that we respect religious observance and diversity and I would therefore wish to recommend that where a suitable non-consecrated space is available that this is used in preference to a consecrated space.

John Sellgren
Returning Officer