

I am writing in my role as Chair of Westley Parish Council to express the council's disquiet at your email dated December 19, 2022 concerning the Interim Polling Place review as it affects Westley Village.

We are strongly opposed to any suggested closure of the village polling station let alone the notion that villagers should travel to an adjacent polling district.

Well you may have a concern about disabled access, I would underline that the other focus of your review is to 'seek to ensure that all electors have reasonable facilities for voting as practicable in the circumstances'.

As you know, to reach the nearest alternative polling station (Westbury) requires a car journey of almost one mile. It is not accessible by public transport and would be a challenging walk for any elderly resident. As you also know, the policy of your council is to discourage superfluous use of motor vehicles.

The Parish Council is also uncertain as to whether it is legal in parliamentary elections to have a polling station which is outside the boundaries of the Parliamentary constituency. It would certainly be unusual and doesn't sit easily with the spirit of the legislation about polling places.

The impact, therefore, of closing the polling station in Westley would be to disenfranchise a considerable proportion of the electorate simply on the basis that Westley polling station does not have disabled access.

As you know from your own research, there is not an alternative venue in Westley and the venue we have has previously been central and adequate for its purpose.

While it would be preferable to have a polling station with disabled access, we have noted the comment from the Home Office in the Select Committee on Home Affairs (Appendices to Minutes of Evidence – Volume II). In Appendix 1, Section F Polling Station Issues 6.6, it is stated that councils are required '**so far as is reasonable and practicable** to designate as polling places only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled'.

However, in the following section of the memorandum (6.7) it is made clear that 'a building would not be a more suitable polling place **if it is so far removed from most of the electors in the polling district as to be inconvenient for them to reach it**'. As you know from your correspondence with Councillor Holder that is clearly the view of the local community and its representatives.

Having said all that, the Parish Council is willing to begin discussions with Westley Club about the provision of disabled access and to set up a feasibility study to find out how this might be achieved. One clear factor would be cost and we note that the 'New Burden' funding allowed for in the recent Election Act includes a category to encourage voting by those with disabilities. It is also stated that councils are entitled to interpret the use of this category of funding broadly so there may be some leeway for your Council to fund this access, at least in part. We would be interested to hear your views on this.

Should your council be able to provide some grant funding, the Parish Council and Westley Club would be prepared to contribute or to seek funding from charitable bodies.

Given this reassurance, the level of concern and the clear guidance that polling station reviews should not inconvenience voters the Council would suggest that the Westley Village polling station should be maintained for the next five years. After that time, we would be happy to have a further review.

There is always a concern in any review of this kind that West Suffolk may be seeking economies rather than ensuring that the electorate have places to vote and given current wider concerns about voter suppression and the low turnout in some elections (although not in Westley) it does not make good sense to be seen to be closing polling stations where there are not adequate alternatives.

Yours

Chris Anderson  
Chair Westley Parish Council

N.B - An additional point below.

The Returning Officer for the West Suffolk Constituency within the boundary of which Westley falls is the party responsible for selecting Westley's polling station. It seems to me that this reinforces the fact that the Parish of Westley must have its own polling station since it falls outside the boundary of the BSE Constituency.

The Westley Club is this parish's recognised Community Centre to which all Westley's residents have daily access. There have never been any complaints about accessibility (or lack of) and, since it is **within easy reach of all electors from across our polling district** the Parish Council wishes it to remain the polling station for the Parish of Westley.