



# Church Stretton

Town Council

28<sup>th</sup> August 2022

Miranda Garrard  
Solicitor  
Democratic Services Manager  
Shropshire Council

By email

Dear Ms. Garrard,

## **Polling station review – All Stretton**

Thank you for your email dated 26<sup>th</sup> August inviting representations regarding the establishment of a polling station for the community of All Stretton. I am replying to you but have copied in your colleague, Fiona Howe, as you suggest.

## **Background**

All Stretton is a village of around 600 souls of which slightly more than 400 are on the electoral register. It is probably the community with the highest proportion of residents of retirement age in the county (71% aged 55 or over) and in a recent poll 96% of All Stretton residents responding cited maintaining its independence from the nearby town of Church Stretton as their highest priority.

The village lies between 1.5 miles (at the south) and 2 miles (at the north) from the centre of Church Stretton requiring the use of cars to attend the polling station in the town. There is no suitable public transport which would facilitate voting. During the pandemic providing lifts to polling stations was not allowed, and this resulted in many All Stretton residents becoming disenfranchised. Any suggested use of more postal votes is not compatible with many older residents and deprives people of important social contact: isolation remains a key issue in rural communities.

As such, the conclusion of residents was that the current arrangements were not working and that All Stretton merited its own polling station.

## History

Approximately three years ago the All Stretton Village Society (ASVS) started a conversation with Claire Porter who had responsibility for these matters at that time. The provisions of the 1983 Act were rehearsed, and in particular “section 18 (2)(b) “F5...,each parish or community shall in the absence of special circumstances be a separate polling district...[and] (c) the polling station for any polling district shall be an area in that district...”

No special circumstances were identified and it was agreed that All Stretton should have its own polling station. However, by that time the covid-19 pandemic was rearing its head, and in a spirit of cooperation residents and Claire’s team agreed that work on a new polling station should be suspended until after the pandemic had abated. Since that time the All Stretton village hall has been inspected and found to be suitable for use as a polling station.

In May 2021 the majority of Councillors on Church Stretton Town Council were replaced, with ironically a substantive election held for the ward of All Stretton which required residents to travel to Church Stretton to vote in person for their local ward councillors.

The Town Council works very closely with the ASVS and is fully supportive of the village’s wish to have its own polling station. To that end, the Town Council holds a budget for local elections, as parish and town councils should, and Shropshire Council is responsible for the cost of unitary elections. Based on Shropshire Council estimates, the annualised cost of elections based on a four year cycle would be around £100. It was surprising, therefore, to see cost cited by Unitary Councillors as a reason for blocking this amenity.

A final issue raised by Unitary Councillors relates to “issues with identifying experienced staff at polling stations...and in particular in more rural areas.” Shropshire is a rural county and it is difficult to reconcile this position with the support given to changes proposed to urban locations. Rural communities frequently feel abandoned and the optics of this argument will further undermine confidence in governance.

As a suggestion, the Town Council employs a number of staff who could operate a polling station, some of which are frequently asked to do so and are very experienced. The Town Council would strongly support its staff in undertaking this public service, and this may help to meet the demand. Further, there are many local residents who could be trained for such a role and the Town Council would offer facilities to support such training. As an example, there are two retired County Chief Executives in All Stretton, and many more retired local authority staff. Do you know what steps have been taken to recruit such people?

## Summary and conclusions

The village of All Stretton is a discreet and separate community from Church Stretton and under the Representation of the People Act 1983 constitutes a separate polling district, and in the absence of special circumstances should be afforded its own polling station. This position has the support of local residents, the All Stretton Village Society, local ward councillors and the Church Stretton Town Council.

Given that Shropshire Council’s own estimates put the cost at around £100 a year, and that the Town Council has properly reserved the necessary funds (and has done for many years), it is difficult to understand what motives exist to deny All Stretton a polling station, particularly as this has been a matter which has been progressed in partnership with Shropshire Council for three years and which was considered a settled matter only delayed by covid -19.

The argument that rural communities should be denied access to local polling stations because of the difficulties in finding staff is shocking in a county as rural as Shropshire, and I have made a number of suggestions for the Town Council to work with Shropshire to help train people to assist with elections across the south of the county. If you identify any other ‘hot spots’ I would happily work with other mayors to find volunteers to train.

In short, the 1983 Act creates the duty to provide a polling station, costs have been shown not to be an issue, there are no special circumstances identified, and the optics of not providing a polling station on the basis that it is too difficult to do so in a rural area denies the realities of what is Shropshire, particularly given the age demographic of the village.

I should be grateful if the proposal can be reviewed and a recommendation made to Councillors to support the establishment of a polling station in All Stretton.

If there are any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Andy Munro  
Mayor  
Church Stretton Town Council

Cc

Fiona Howe, Shropshire Council

Cllr Helen Stowell, All Stretton Ward, CSTC

Gillian Bailey, Clerk, CSTC