

Upper Tweed Community Council

Thirlestane House,
Broughton,
Biggar, ML12 6HQ
Telephone 01899-830250
E-mail: thirlestane1903@aol.com
22 September 2014

Louise McGeogh,
Democratic Services Team Leader,
Scottish Borders Council,
Council Headquarters,
Newtown St Boswells,
Melrose, TD6 OSA

Dear Ms McGeogh,

REVIEW OF POLLING PLACES

Further to your letter of 1 July, I have now obtained feedback from a number of Tweedsmuir residents about your proposal to close their polling place. Feelings are running high on this issue. The comments we received were entirely negative and the main points which were made can be summarised as follows:

- Because Tweedsmuir, a dispersed rural area, has no public transport, it would be difficult for many residents (including the elderly) to travel to the Broughton polling station. For some people this could mean a round trip of up to 30 miles. If it is essential to close a polling station, it should be one in a heavily populated area where other polling stations are within reach. At the very least, if the Tweedsmuir polling station were closed, the Scottish Borders Council should provide a bus on polling day to take voters to and from Broughton.
- A postal vote is a poor alternative, because it does not enable voters to hear last-minute arguments and developments which may influence their decision (as occurred in the recent referendum, for example). If postal voting is left to the last minute, there are always doubts about whether the vote will reach the returning officer in time. While postal voting is acceptable as a voluntary alternative for those who wish to use it for personal reasons, it is not acceptable on a compulsory basis, which would be the effect for those voters who cannot reach Broughton. It is wrong for the manner of voting to be dictated by where a person lives.
- One of the reasons for preferring to vote in person rather than by post is that a spoiled ballot paper can be replaced at the polling station. Moreover, if anyone is unsure about the rules for filling the ballot paper in, they can seek guidance from the staff.
- In the past Tweedsmuir has tended to have a relatively high turn-out at elections, and it is likely that the proposed closure would reduce this and undermine the local community, which would be a backwards step for democracy at a time when the Scottish Government has an objective of greater stakeholder engagement.

As one of our respondents put it: "Removing our local polling station flies in the face of both current political trends and sensible practical ways of promoting local democracy. Please don't do it".

Yours sincerely,

Chris Lewin, Chairman

Polmood Lodge, Tweedsmuir, Biggar, ML12 6QN

22nd September 2014

Louise McGeogh,
Democratic Services Team Leader,
Scottish Borders Council,
Council Headquarters,
Newtown St Boswells,
Melrose, TD6 OSA

25 SEP 2014

ADAM D. LEGG

Dear Ms McGeogh

Proposal to close Tweedsmuir Polling station

I heard about the proposal to close Tweedsmuir polling station through the chairperson of Upper Tweed Community Council. I took it upon myself to consult the Tweedsmuir community because we have had confirmation from Scottish Borders Council that we are able to set up a separate community council but do not expect to be operating as Tweedsmuir Community Council until later in the year.

These are the comments and concerns that have come to me and as you will see, Tweedsmuir residents are very concerned and angry about the proposal to remove Tweedsmuir polling station.

The size of the community should not be a factor in the ease (or otherwise) of exercising one's right to vote - if it were - might that not be discriminatory?
As there is no public transport at Tweedsmuir it is essential to maintain a local polling station within walking distance of the village

What exactly does the council do for this area? £2000 a year poll tax with no return - of course the polling station should stay open

As central government pays all the expenses for polling stations throughout the country - SBC is unjustified in proposing to close any of them - I endorse all the comments you have received so far.

this is an extremely well used polling station in a very rural area with no access to public transport I feel that removal of this polling station would once again undermine this fragile rural community.

Proposal relates to an arbitrary figure rather than compelling reasons
Central government pays election costs - so cost saving should not influence decisions inclosing a rural polling station

30 minute round trip car journey

The manner in which I decide to vote should not be dictated by where I reside

Voting by post deprives last minute choice

Not in the spirit of Scottish Government's objective "greater stakeholder engagement"

Polmood Lodge, Tweedsmuir, Biggar, ML12 6QN

If the boundaries were changed to include all of the new Tweedsmuir
Community council area - would numbers not exceed 100?

Too far to travel

No public transport

Postal vote is not an acceptable alternative due to last minute arguments and
discussions

Size of the community should not be a factor in denying people the right to vote

Disproportionate impact on rural areas

Only one post box that takes large letters and lack of confidence in postal
service

Against political trends and local democracy

Undemocratic to deny the opportunity of voting locally

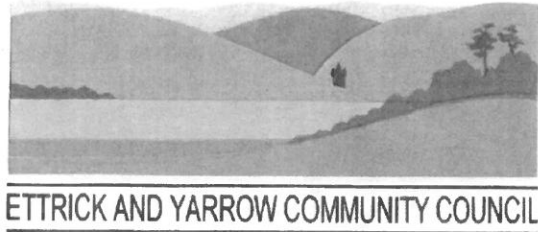
Erosion of rural services and facilities

Historic high percentage of voters at Tweedsmuir

Please can you take our comments, concerns and worries into consideration
and inform Tweedsmuir residents of any further developments.

Yours sincerely

Christine Parker
Polmood Lodge
Tweedsmuir
Biggar
ML12 6QN
01899880329



Louise McGeoch
Democratic Services Team Leader
Chief Executive's Department
Scottish Borders Council
Council Headquarters
Newtown St. Boswells
Melrose, TD6 0SA

October 29th 2014

Dear Ms McGeoch

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your proposals to close a number of rural polling stations. Etrick & Yarrow Community Council strongly opposes the closure of Cappercleuch Polling Station on the following grounds:

- Village Halls are the lifeline of rural communities and many, like Cappercleuch, are already struggling to survive. Cappercleuch is particularly vulnerable just now and this proposal would remove a critical function from the hall.
- These proposals appear to run counter to the Scottish Government policy of supporting rural communities. We are working hard to revitalise the valleys, and this proposal is not helpful in this respect.
- We accept that the cost per capita is high, but this will always be the case for any more rural service. We have already had a reduction in our mobile library service and are unhappy that it is the most rural areas that continue to be penalised.
- It is regrettable that SBC did not conduct an Equality Impact Assessment prior to putting these proposals out for consultation. This has subsequently been undertaken, but has omitted to consider the fact that closing rural polling stations discriminates against those living in these more isolated areas. Voters now have even further to travel to vote and research shows that voter turnout (particularly for local and European elections) reduces with distance travelled. While we recognise the alternative of postal voting, not everyone has faith in the reliability of this method and all voters, in our view, should have equal access to the voting process.
- The total saving for all 10 polling places (at less than £6,000) is very, very small. This is a very small price to pay for encouraging a fair and democratic process which does not discriminate further against residents living in very rural areas.
- We feel that SBC should look at other larger alternative savings that could be made which relate to the challenging geography of the region. There are numerous meetings where Council Officers (and probably Councillors) travel significant distances to meet. The travel time (which is a significant cost) could be eliminated and the costs of the meeting (travel expenses, meeting rooms

etc) significantly reduced if more use was made of tele and video conferencing. Staff may require training to do this effectively, but it could make a really significant saving for the Council – without affecting services. Please look at these alternative savings options and retain our local polling places.

- Finally, we wish to draw your attention to the fact that we were not consulted during the original review of Polling Places and are not very happy about this.

We look forward to hearing that the Council has rejected these proposals and in particular that Cappercleuch will continue to be a Polling Place for the foreseeable future.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Harrison

Barbara Harrison
Secretary
Ettrick & Yarrow Community Council

SINGLIEHILL END, ETTRICK VALLEY, SELKIRK TD7 5HP
Tel: 01750 52260 E-mail: bckharrison@btinternet.com

THE LAMMERMUIR COMMUNITY COUNCIL

November 2014

RESPONSE TO SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL'S PROPOSAL TO CLOSE CRANSHAWS VILLAGE HALL AS A POLLING PLACE

The Lammermuir Community Council object to Scottish Borders Council's proposal to close Cranshaws Village Hall as a local polling place as it would seriously imperil the viability of one of the few remaining facilities within our small rural community.

INTRODUCTION – OUR COMMUNITY.

Cranshaws is one of two rural polling stations that serve our widely dispersed rural population. Less than half of our residents live in the three small settlements of Longformacus, Cranshaws and Ellemford, so travelling to vote may already entail a journey of several miles. The proposed alternative polling place could add an additional trip of 15 miles to this.

Community reaction to the proposals to close Cranshaws has been passionate. Voting within your local community isn't just about involvement in the democratic process but is an important social activity when many live in remote locations or have isolated lives and jobs.

The closure proposals have caused great local concern, from both those directly affected and from many others who see this as a particularly bad call by Scottish Borders Council Officers.

Closure would cause unnecessary additional adverse social and economic impacts on a population that already faces significant challenges. The very modest savings to SBC would be dwarfed by the loss of economic and social activity that would result. Significant additional costs would be imposed on many of our residents in exercising their rights to fully engage with the democratic processes across all elections and referenda.

Most fundamentally it would send the message that our local authority doesn't really want to engage fully with its smaller, more remote communities by imposing additional costs and barriers against them fully engaging with the electoral process.

Residents have told us it should be recognised as a basic right for voters to enter their local polling place with the freedom to make their decision right until that moment on polling day. Postal votes are an option but, as the recent Independence Referendum showed, only the ability to cast ones vote after the full campaign has run its course allows voters full engagement and access to any debate. They are not a suitable alternative to the ability to vote locally and in person which is afforded to most residents of the Scottish Borders.

Cutting waste would be applauded by our residents but to save perhaps £500 every four years whilst causing far greater costs and economic and social loss with the consequent denial of local access to all other elections and votes seems both unwise, inefficient and unjust.

OUR RESPONSE

This response is primarily focussed on the proposed closure of Cranshaws as a polling place, but it **should be taken as an objection to the whole policy of closing rural polling places.**

We have received support from across the Scottish Borders and we support those other communities that are objecting to this proposal.

We have worked closely with our neighbouring Community Council at Abbey St Bathans, Preston & Bonkyl. We are grateful for their support and delighted that their polling place has already been relieved. Perhaps due to updated information we forced SBC to produce?

Since the closure proposals were revealed this Community Council has engaged repeatedly with Councillors and Officers at Scottish Borders Council. We thank all for support that has been given, particularly by Members from across the Borders. We thank officers for information that has been offered but we regret the reluctance to fully engage by officers at the highest level and the need to ask Freedom of Information Requests to obtain current information that should have been freely available.

All of the points we have raised with SBC, particularly those raised in repeated correspondence with the Chief Executive, should be fully considered as part of our consultation response on this issue.

We comment on SBC's processes later in this response. In summary we consider the process and implementation of this proposal to be fundamentally flawed: particularly the deliberate omission of a Rural Proofing Assessment and a less-than-thorough Equalities Impact Assessment.

We consider that the Chief Executive's recent order to undertake a review of the EIA and do a Rural Proofing Assessment fully vindicates our stance. Regrettably neither of these assessments has yet been made available, so we are not in an informed position to comment on them prior to this consultation closing. We have asked that we have an opportunity to comment on these should they emerge before Members make a decision at the November Council Meeting.

We ask that officers of Scottish Borders Council reconsider their proposal and recommend to Members that this, and other small rural polling stations that have their community's support, should be maintained, not closed, and their use encouraged.

OUR REASONS

Closure of rural polling places denies residents in small and marginal communities the opportunity to fully engage with the democratic process – something that a postal vote does not offer.

Alternative polling places would impose significant additional costs on voters in a relatively poor community.

Closing Cranshaws would be particularly unjust as we have recently expended considerable cost and effort to make it fully accessible – in part due to a threat by SBC to remove its role as a polling place is it was not.

Closure would deny economic benefit to the area through hall hire fees and local electoral staff payments. These “savings” would be costs to the community – they would be significantly amplified by the consequential loss of all other referenda and elections.

Closure proposals are arbitrary and have not followed SBC’s own policies regarding Rural Proofing or Equalities Impact Assessments.

Closure would create a fundamentally unjust two-tier structure of access to the democratic process – yet again it would be the remoter and more rural communities that suffer the lower level of access to yet another service.

SBC has been in error in promoting this policy in advance of any understanding of any likely impacts that would result. Rural Proofing and Equalities Impact Assessments ought to have been done before any proposal to close had been drafted. These policies are there to inform policy making, not to justify a policy after it has been promoted.

Until this Community Council’s FOI officers were promoting a policy based on outdated 2012 figures. These are now significantly changed but we are unaware that SBC has put these new figures fully into the public domain so people can make fully-informed consultation responses.

SBC has exaggerated the per voter costs. As our FOI shows they are significantly lower in 2014 than the figures presented by SBC – we refer to previous communications with SBC on these voter costs.

Voter numbers at Cranshaws, and at other polling places, have increased notably since this policy was first promoted.

The 100 voter threshold used by SBC is arbitrary and unjust. There is no support for it in policy and it intrinsically harms the most fragile communities.

This policy removes a facility and service from those communities that already have the fewest – our shops, schools and kirks are often gone – this threatens the viability of the last remaining community facility in many communities. As this Community Council has advised when responding to the Local Plan, SBC’s refusal to include any assessment of the region’s smaller rural settlements in in Volume 2 Settlements of the LDP means that their needs, threats and opportunities are largely unknown to SBC and its policy makers. This leads to ill-informed and poor decision-making. SBC should conduct a review of its smaller rural settlements to inform policy as a matter of urgency.

Access and engagement with the democratic processes.

Closing Cranshaws as a polling station would deny our residents the ability to fully engage with the democratic process. Residents have told us that the act of going to vote is import to them and that voting in a hall that is a traditional centre of local activity is important too.

SBC’s proposal would not just deny local access at local elections but would amplify its impacts by forcing the consequential end of polling for Holyrood, Westminster and Brussels Elections and any referenda too. One saving leading to for, or five, cuts!

Closure as a polling place can only lead to less engagement with the democratic process as residents have to spend more time, travel further and incur additional expense to vote.

Closure would be likely to impact on other democratic activity too. Would Councillors, MSPs, MPs and MEPs still be likely to choose halls such as Cranshaws as venues for constituent's surgeries if they were no longer deemed relevant enough to be a polling place? In time it is likely that they would reduce and candidates would be less likely to come out to our communities to canvas, to leaflet or to visit.

Full engagement in the democratic process is what is at stake here and the only proposed mitigation cited is access to a postal vote. That is woefully inadequate and simply doesn't allow for full engagement. Not only are votes required to be cast days before campaigning has finished, but the opportunity for reflection all the way to the polling booth is denied.

Additional Costs for Communities

The economic impacts would be significant. SBC's modest saving of £565 every four years (£141.25 pa) would be dwarfed by the consequential loss of an average of nine elections per ten years from losing local, Scottish, UK National and European Elections. The increased likelihood of future referenda or other elections would increase this loss.

Most of what SBC identifies as the "costs" of using small rural polling places are in fact helpful local economic benefits: hall rentals support much-needed local facilities such as village halls whilst the modest fees paid to election staff tend to go to local, often retired, residents in the community for whom the modest payments are a helpful, if occasional, small financial boost.

Payments to village halls are often vital and to lose rental from at least four sets of elections would be a significant impact on many halls. In the case of Cranshaws it seems particularly unjust as several years ago SBC threatened to withdraw its use as a polling place if it didn't become fully accessible. With significant expenditure from our small community and much local effort, it has made itself fully accessible just as SBC decide to withdraw its function as a polling place. This seems particularly hard to accept when not all of SBC's estate is fully accessible.

Much has been made by SBC of the cost per voter as justification for closing Cranshaws and other polling stations, but nothing has been done on the cost ~~to~~ each voter were they to vote in person under the proposed regime. From Cranshaws the additional expense of the extra 15 mile round trip to vote at Preston would be £6.75 based on standard motoring costs. Were just half of our electorate to do so, that would be an additional economic cost to our community for £243 at every election or vote and many will already have to travel several miles to have voted in Cranshaws.

Environmental Impacts

Were just half of Cranshaws electorate to have to travel 15 additional miles to Preston an additional 540 miles would be travelled over tough roads, often in the four wheel drives that are the necessary working vehicles of many of our residents. Those impacts or costs have not been considered by SBC.

PROPOSED MITIGATION

Postal Votes

Postal votes are an option for voters but they don't allow full engagement with the democratic process. Despite SBC suggesting that postal votes are acceptable alternatives and popular, it is clear that despite our remoteness, lack of public transport and a relatively aging population postal votes are not locally popular with just 5 registered in Cranshaws in 2014 and 3 in 2012.

Residents tell us that being able to enter the polling booth whilst still considering their vote is a reasonable expectation for voters. The recent referendum demonstrated that many who voted by post were denied the opportunity to consider and act on developments in the campaign that happened after they had voted. It is clear from the recent referendum campaign that not only were their complications with postal votes but they denied voters access to the full debate before casting their vote.

Postal voting adds additional complications and has impacts for those who might struggle with literacy or sight issues.

Postal votes are not an adequate mitigation for the removal of a community to vote in person within their own community. It is vital that SBC do not create two tier access to democracy.

PROCESS

SBC's processes in pursuing these closures has been flawed from the start: proposals emerged with no clear basis in policy, consultation has been both minimal and grudging, rural proofing assessments have been avoided, Equalities impacts minimised and full engagement with affected communities declined.

Critically it appears that had this Community Council not been forced to ask a Freedom of Information Request Members would have been asked to take a decision on closure based on historic 2012 (ie 30 month old) data that is now much-changed.

It could be argued that the lack of consultation could be justified by the original statutory consultation on voting arrangements receiving relatively little feedback. Of course no suggestion of closures was made in that consultation and our Community Council merely recorded its satisfaction with the status quo at our regular meeting.

When closure proposals emerged from that process in March 2014 the only justification appeared to be financial savings of the order of £5,688 every four years or £1422 per annum across the Scottish Borders. With two polling places no longer meeting the "under 100" arbitrary criteria that nominal saving is reduced to just £4198 or just £1049.50 per annum.

We need to recognise that the very nominal saving of £4,198 every four years, even if seen as desirable, is significantly overstated as some of the election costs will remain despite alternative polling places, especially if postal votes are encouraged. That potential saving is now presumably reduced as two of the proposed polling stations no longer meet the closure criteria?

The costs of Scottish Borders Council management in pursuing this tiny savings have yet to be quantified, the costs of the voluntary organisations and concerned local residents in questioning them never will be.

On 1 July 2014 when challenged by this Community Council about the scale of any savings and the additional costs to our residents and the impacts of denying polling in other elections SBC's

Democratic Team Leader advised that all other elections had their costs reimbursed by Central Government *"however, we were considering the public purse at all levels."*

This raises two interlinked issues;

What imperative or national policy was SBC pursuing by seeking to close small rural polling stations to all elections? SBC appears to have no remit to "save" other legislative institutions' democratic engagement budgets by declaring an arbitrary 100-electors threshold. This comment appears to be bolstering the defence of a weak policy when challenged.

Why did SBC consider it appropriate to pursue a policy that would prevent at least three times as much income coming into the Scottish Borders region as it was spending? I.e. By "saving" £4,198 - £5,688 similar incoming benefits to the region would be lost with every referendum, Holyrood, Westminster or European election. So SBC's saving costs the region three or four times as much throughout the full electoral cycle.

We reiterate that whilst these sums are expressed as "costs" they are actually much needed, and valued, economic benefits to the small rural communities that host these threatened polling stations.

The additional economic costs to our residents were closure to happen require to be factored in too. The true economic cost of this policy is the total lost income to the Scottish Borders of all prevented elections in each of the closed polling places plus the additional costs for our rural residents to vote at each election

Of course these are the straight economic costs. The social and environmental costs have yet to be assessed by SBC in proper Rural Proofing and Equalities Impact Assessments.

Rural Proofing

Despite a series of enquiries, including direct to the SBC Chief Executive, this Community Council has been unable to ascertain why no Rural Proofing Assessment was undertaken when this is a critical and relevant SBC policy. Here, promoting the closure of rural services, it seems entirely necessary. This seems like the perfect policy for such an assessment: most of the closures were in rural locations, rural facilities were clearly likely to be affected and local services impacted.

We have been informed by the Chief Executive that as of 7 November a Rural Proofing Assessment has now been instructed. Despite enquiries we do not yet know how it will be reported to Members or whether we will have the opportunity to comment before Members make a decision.

It is a central requirement of Rural Proofing that an assessment is undertaken to inform the likely impacts of any proposal. That an assessment has finally (and reluctantly) been undertaken months after a proposal has been formulated, but just days before a decision is due to be taken, seems unhelpful, wrong and unjust.

Equalities Impact Assessment.

SBC is clear in promoting a requirement for Equalities Impact Assessments to be undertaken to inform its decisions and policies. This is clearly widely welcomed. It is a key SBC policy with support at all levels.

There appear to be significant deficiencies in the EIA that supports this policy, particularly as an EIA is supposed to inform any emerging policy, yet here it was done months after SBC had formulated its closure policy.

It is still unclear why SBC were pursuing a policy of polling places closure with a report to Council in March 2014 though an EIA was not approved until August 2014. The assessor was the Democratic Services Team Leader and it was "Agreed by Head of Service" on 14 August 2014 by Tracey Logan in her formal role as Returning Officer.

This was some time after this, and other Community Councils, had indicated significant concern at SBC's polling places closure plans.

Though the EIA was not published, this Community Council requested a copy and SBC provided one.

The EIA Summary received appears to be a tick-box exercise that has been pursued less rigorously than is appropriate for such a significant policy. This is part of the reason why we repeatedly sought a meeting with Ms Logan as she had signed the document off. As well as being done after the policy, the EIA is full of contradictions, understatements and omissions.

Under Summary of Policy/ Service/ Function aims we are just told that "Polling places are provided at various locations within the Scottish Borders to allow registered voters to cast their vote in all local, and national elections." This is a vague statement of the status quo, but not a summary of the policy which is stated as being a "Review of Polling Places". It therefore fails to meet its own requirements.

Under "Strands Impacted" effects on those with health issues are assessed as both "negative" and as "no impact on any person as a result of being in this group". Clearly both options are impossible to reconcile.

Our greatest concern is the assertion that there is no impact on those "Effects on poverty groups". When one looks at the descriptor for this category it seems near-impossible that adverse effects on this group have not been recognised when it is clear that a poor community would suffer additional costs and loss of income multiplied by all elections and referenda.

Clearly there would be an effect on poverty groups. Whilst the general population would be adversely affected by the impacts of a closed polling place our residents would be directly affected by a need to travel an additional 15 miles to vote. Costs include both the mileage cost and the lost time. Literacy issues would be impacted if SBC's desire to see postal voting as the default method for rural communities was followed.

In the "Summary of key recommendations" we are told that "covers 10 polling stations" but only 9 appear in appendix 2 or in subsequent information releases.

In the "Summary of key issues" the issues identified were "reducing numbers of electors voting in person" and "the viability of our smaller polling places". Nowhere was cost mentioned, despite this becoming the central strand of the developing policy.

We trust that all of our concerns – though all of our responses on this issue- will be illustrated in the full report that goes to Members.

We note that the Chief Executive has told us that she plans no officer recommendation and also that there will be one. We don't yet know whether a recommendation will emerge or what it will be so we request the right to address Council before they take their decision.

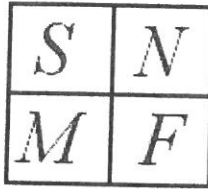
We trust that any recommendation to Members will only be made after we have had an opportunity to comment on the Equalities Impact Assessment that is being revised and the Rural Proofing Assessment that is now underway. We are not sure how SBC itself can be informed by both assessments with a decision due next week at Council?

With best wishes

Mark Rowley

Chairman

Lammermuir Community Council



Floors Makerstoun Nenthorn & Smailholm Community Council

Louise McGeoch
Democratic Services Team Leader
Scottish Borders Council
Newtown St Boswells
TD6 0SA

17 September 2014

Dear Ms McGeoch,

REVIEW OF POLLING PLACES

A meeting was held of the above Community Council on 16 September 2014 and this proposal was discussed. Two Community Councillors were ambivalent but the others, as well as four members of the public, had views to be expressed as follows:

- Whilst there were only 92 electors in Makerstoun on 22 May, there are soon to be far more than that number registered as a number of cottages have been, or are in the process of being, renovated by Makerstoun Estate and thus the total of electors will soon be more than 100 – which should mean that Makerstoun Village Hall should not be closed as a Polling Place.
- In terms of the number of postal voters on 22 May, this number was far higher than normal as 11 voters registered abnormally because they were due to be away on holiday on that date.
- Makerstoun Village Hall is an important part of the community of Makerstoun and the income from its' use as a polling station is vital to it remaining open to be of use to the wider community. In addition, a grant from 'Charity Begins at Home' has just been awarded, received and spent on Makerstoun Village Hall as this charity was so impressed by the role the Village Hall serves in community life.

In the light of these comments, we would be greatly opposed to Makerstoun Village Hall being closed as Polling Place.

Yours sincerely,

Jill Freshwater
Secretary

ADMIN & LEGAL
30 SEP 2014
DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

Review of Polling Places

Response from Kalewater Community Council

I am writing in response to a letter received advising us that the Council intend to close Hownam Polling Station as part of their cost cutting programme before the next election in May 2015.

We discussed this matter at one of our monthly community council meetings and have made it known to the community at large and the response has been pretty well unanimous against any changes to the current voting arrangements.

I also heard the responses of other community councils in the same situation as ourselves at the recent Community Council Network meeting where they clearly stated that it was another stab in the heart of rural community's which have over the last few years lost many services.

Weighing up the costs, would it not be more sensible to close polling stations in towns where there are usually more than one meaning voters would have to travel a few hundred extra yards instead of an extra 10 miles or more in the case of closing Hownam polling station.

If there are savings to be made surely it is only fair that everyone takes the hit not just those of us in small somewhat isolated communities.

Kind regards,

Eric Mc Nulty

Chairman
Kalewater Community Council

Response from Jed Valley Community Council regarding the proposal to cease the use of Edgerston Village Hall as a Polling Place (email extract)

I refer to the above and your letter of 1 July. At the Jed Valley Community Council meeting on 7 October consideration was given to the possibility of closing the Edgerston Village Hall Polling Place. Members had previously been circulated with the information provided with your correspondence in July and following discussion on the matter, a vote was taken resulting in a majority of members Against the closure.

I trust this will be taken into account when the Council consider the matter at their meeting on 30 October.

Kind regards

Graham Fry

Chair

JVCC

Response from Crailing, Eckford and Nisbet Community Council regarding the proposal to cease the use of Crailing Village Hall as a Polling Place (email extract)

Further to your letter of 1st July regarding the review of polling places. I can advise that I raised this at our last Community Council meeting on 3rd September and also notified the wider community who are registered on our group email system. I specifically asked for any feedback by 22nd September 2014. There was a general acceptance of the proposal at the meeting and the only negative feedback I have received since is noted below:

“Regarding the Council going to stop using Lothian Hall for Elections, I think it is a poor excuse in this day and age to use disability access considering the massive amount of postal votes these days.”

Regards

John

John Campbell
Chairman
Craising, Eckford & Nisbet Community Council

**Submission by Hermitage Hall
to the Scottish Borders Council
on the Proposal to Close Hermitage Hall as a Polling Location**

On 01 October 2014, the Scottish Borders Council Democratic Services office (considering a new Upper Liddesdale & Hermitage Community Council, in which Hermitage Hall is located, was in the process of being, but had not yet been, formed) invited Hermitage Hall to submit views on the above proposal on behalf of the local community. It should be noted that the Hermitage Hall Committee includes members living in all sectors of the Upper Liddesdale & Hermitage Community Council catchment area and the views of the Hermitage Hall Committee set out in this submission are truly representative of the broad Upper Liddesdale & Hermitage community.

The Chief Executive Officer of the Scottish Borders Council has advised that the report to full Council in November 2014 will contain all responses received from affected communities. She has also indicated that there will be no recommendation from Officers whether or not any of the proposed closures should proceed and it will be a matter for Councillors to decide what action should be taken on the future of each individual polling station. She further advised it would be appropriate for direct representations to be made to local Councillors.

In accordance with that advice, a presentation, with a comprehensive written submission, was made by Hermitage Hall to the Teviot & Liddesdale Area Forum on Tuesday, 21 October 2014. The submission included an overview of the history of Hermitage Hall, its organisation, operations, activities, its active community engagement and its important role within the Upper Liddesdale & Hermitage area. The submission was supplemented by information gathered by SBC's Democratic Services office concerning voter enrollment, turn-out and costs for the Hermitage Hall area, as part of equivalent information for all polling locations with less than 100 residents on the applicable electoral rolls.

The submission to the Teviot & Liddesdale Area Forum concluded with a request that:

The Scottish Borders Council reject the proposed closure of Hermitage Hall as a polling place within the Scottish Borders.

To that end, we strongly argue that all community halls, and especially Hermitage Hall, serve a vital role in local communities. They are volunteer driven and strive hard to keep communities together and to provide a wide, diverse range of services/events/activities for active community involvement, at no cost to Scottish Borders Council. Community halls, including Hermitage Hall, should be encouraged by Scottish Borders Council to thrive and prosper and engage their communities in enhancing the quality of life throughout the Borders. Removing small community halls, such as Hermitage Hall, from the direct involvement of local residents in the democratic election process, is insensitive, inappropriate and counter to all Scottish Borders Council stands for.

Set out below, and taken from the submission to the Teviot & Liddesdale Area Forum, is a summary of the justification for Hermitage Hall to remain as an election polling location:

1. **Hermitage Hall plays a very important and central role to bringing residents within its community together.** The Hall is located in a widely-spread rural area where it is not easy to connect with neighbours, nor have a sense of belonging. Every single use of Hermitage Hall is vital to the well-being of the Hall as a volunteer driven gathering place for the community. Being an integral part of the election/determination process for community councillors, SBC Councillors, MSPs, MPs, MEPs and for national issues (such as the Referendum) is important to the community's sense and pride of the role of Hermitage Hall within the Hermitage area. **If the Hall is closed as a community polling location, it can only be seen by the community as a diminishment by Scottish Borders Council of the Hall's viability and role in our community.**

2. Local engagement is a key policy of the Scottish government and Scottish Borders Council has strongly committed to enhancing, improving and assisting wherever possible the strengths of local engagement. **Disengaging the residents of the Hermitage area from the ability to cast votes in elections in their own community hall is contrary to the policy and commitment to local engagement.**

3. **Hermitage Hall is located in the geographic centre of the new Upper Liddesdale & Hermitage Community Council area. It is ideally situated as a local polling place.** For the vote taken of UL&H area residents in May/June 2013 by the SBC Review Group to determine whether a new community council should be formed, it was determined that there were approximately 125 residents on the electoral roll within that area. However, for some unknown reason, there are (as of 18 September 2014) only 69 residents on the electoral roll designated to vote at Hermitage Hall for regular elections. It appears that all the residents living on the B6357 within the UL&H area have been designated to cast votes at Newcastleton Village Hall, although they must travel more than twice the distance to vote there than at Hermitage Hall. **A realignment of the electoral roll to reflect the UL&H community, and the community served by Hermitage Hall, would raise the number of voters on the roll to in excess of 125, which is well above the arbitrary cut-off point of 100 being used to assess the closure of rural halls, including Hermitage Hall, as polling places.** Realignment would also better enfranchise half the voters within the UL&H area, as opposed to making it more difficult for the original half of the electorate, already voting at Hermitage Hall, to participate in the election process. It should also be noted and stressed that Hermitage Hall is the polling location designated by SBC Democratic Services office for all 125+ voters to cast ballots in an election for the Upper Liddesdale & Hermitage Community Council.

4. The **suggested saving to SBC to close Hermitage Hall as a polling place is £550. This is incurred once every four years when SBC elections are being held, i.e., on average a cost of £125 per year to SBC.** Other elections for MSPs, MPs and MEPs are held in the intervening years, but all costs associated with those votes are fully reimbursed to SBC. We respectfully suggest **the cost to SBC of using Hermitage Hall as a polling place is minimal.** However, **the removal of Hermitage Hall as a voting place within its community for all elections, and thereby adversely impacting the ability of our residents to vote, constitutes a serious, indeterminable, intangible cost/loss to the Hermitage Hall community.**

5. It has also been **suggested that postal votes**, which can be implemented at less cost per voter than in-person balloting, **should be more relied on and promoted in rural areas, such as that surrounding Hermitage Hall.** There is **no doubt that postal voting must be available** for voters who would otherwise not be able to cast a vote in an election, **but postal voting should not be considered as the default voting method.** It deprives a voter of the ability to be fully informed on issues up to the vote day (a criticism made about postal voting in the Referendum), to assess final arguments by all candidates and to possibly meet candidates at the polling place on vote day. There is again **an indeterminable intangible adverse impact on the election process when a voter feels he/she must consider casting (or has no choice but to cast) a postal vote because the distance and inconvenience of getting to the nearest polling place is too great.** Closing Hermitage Hall as a polling place and forcing local voters to travel more than twice the distance than can be done now to vote, oft times in very difficult conditions, will have that adverse impact.

Conclusion:

The unacceptable proposal to close Hermitage Hall as a polling place goes to the heart of the right of all residents in our remote, rural community to cast in-person votes in the democratic election process in a fair and reasonable manner, as do the vast majority of other residents within the Borders.

On behalf of our community, we urge Scottish Borders Council to reject the proposed closure of Hermitage Hall as a polling location within the Scottish Borders.