

COUNCIL DECISION

Leader of the Council – Councillor Bob Cook

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2023

SUMMARY

This report sets out proposed changes for polling districts and places taking into account the submission of the Acting Returning Officer and feedback received from the consultation. The consultation ended on 29 October 2023

REASON FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS/DECISION

To meet a statutory requirement requiring Councils to carry out a Polling District and Places Review every five years; to take account of feedback from electoral events, electorate projections and consultation feedback.

RECOMMENDATION

Cabinet is asked to consider and recommend to Council changes to Polling Districts and Polling Places at the meeting to be held on 23 November 2023, as outlined in the attached Acting Returning Officers recommendations, incorporating the responses to the comments laid out in the table below.

DETAIL

1. Each Local Authority is required to carry out reviews of Polling Districts and Polling Places in its area.
2. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 changed the timing of these reviews and reviews must be held within a 16-month period starting on 1 October every fifth year after 1 October 2013. Ward boundaries are unaffected by the review.
3. The Council's last statutory review was carried out in 2018 and an interim review was held in 2022 when a number of changes were made as a result of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England Ward Boundary Review. The changes approved by Council on 23 November 2022 were implemented and in place for the May 2023 local elections held in the Borough.
4. A Council's area is divided into polling districts with one or more districts making up a ward, with a polling place being the area or building within a polling district in which a polling station is situated. The Council must identify

the polling districts and polling places within the Borough. The (Acting) Returning Officer is responsible for identifying the polling stations within the polling place.

5. Electoral Commission Guidance states: *Where the polling district/place review is to be carried out before the new electoral boundaries are fully in force, it will need to be based on the current electoral boundaries but should also take any new boundaries that are not yet in force into account. To avoid having to review the polling districts and polling places again once the new boundaries are fully in force, any parts of existing electoral areas that will be split when the new boundaries come into effect could be made into separate polling districts as part of the review.*

Also, until the new boundaries are fully in force, the register will need to be constructed in a way that is capable of reflecting the current and the new boundaries. Again, this can be achieved by making any parts of existing electoral areas that will be split when the new boundaries come into effect into separate polling districts.

For the same reasons where, as a result of a review of one set of electoral boundaries, the boundaries for different elections are no longer co-terminus, those areas that are no longer co-terminus could also be made into separate polling districts.

In short, polling districts changes have been considered to include existing and future Parliamentary boundaries. This will be achieved by merging into appropriate adjoining polling districts as identified in the 2022 review and keeping some small polling districts that due to the geography of the Parliamentary Boundary are unsuitable to combine with neighbouring polling districts.

6. The review has considered:
 - a. The boundaries of polling districts – for example, are they well defined? Do they follow natural boundaries? Are there suitable transport links? Are there any obstacles to crossing polling district boundaries?
 - b. Polling Places – the location, size and accessibility of the polling place and its availability now and in the future
 - c. Polling Stations – the suitability and accessibility of the room or area for use as a polling station (unlike polling districts and polling places which are fixed by the Local Authority, polling stations are chosen by the relevant Returning Officer for the election).
7. During the 2023 Elections, the opportunity was taken to complete the Electoral Commission's evaluation templates in order to assess the suitability/ accessibility of the polling place/ station. Presiding Officers were also asked to record any complaints/comments received.
8. The Boundary Commission has undertaken electorate projections as part of the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023 and the Local Government Ward Boundary Review 2022. The recommendations take into consideration these predictions as well as the increase in postal voters that we have seen since 2021.
9. The Returning Officer's submission summarises the existing arrangements, key issues identified from the 2023 Elections, any notable projected changes in electorate and makes proposals for changes to polling districts/ places.

10. Mobile polling stations continue to be used where no alternative venues can be found. Mobiles stations are expensive and unpopular with voters and suggestions for alternative venues are always welcomed. The use of some schools as polling stations continues to be a problem when the safeguarding of children cannot in the view of the schools be assured, and in these circumstances alternative venues have been identified. The proposals consider Electoral Commission Guidance that the number of electors allocated to a particular polling station should not exceed 2,250 and also the introduction of Voter Identification which is more resource intensive on polling day.
11. Any further feedback and comments from the 2024 Elections in relation to the suitability of existing polling stations will be considered in the planning for future electoral events and statutory reviews.
12. The consultation was published on 1 October 2023 with a closing date for comments of midnight on 29 October 2023. The Acting Returning Officers submission summarised the existing arrangements and their proposals to reduce the number of polling districts by 8, by merging a number of polling places that use the same polling place and keeping 5 smaller polling districts due to the changes in Parliamentary Boundaries.

CONSULTATION

1. The Statutory Notice publicising the review was displayed / sent to:
 - Libraries
 - Website
 - Parish Councils
 - Community Centres
2. In addition, the consultation document and Acting Returning Officer's submission was sent to:
 - Website
 - Libraries
 - All Councillors
 - MPs
 - Parish Councils
 - Disability Groups/ BME/faith community via Catalyst
3. The table below contains a summary of the comments received and comments/revised proposals in response to the consultation feedback.

Ward/Polling District	From	Comment	Acting Returning Officer Response
Grangefield	Councillor Carol Clark	I am concerned about the areas using St. Pauls Church as their polling station. For the May elections asked that we use St Johns Church for the areas of Westfield Crescent etc and Lilac Road etc. They were stuck on to Grangefield ward to make up the numbers and unless the residents have a car, they will be unable to get to St Pauls Church	Agree - Revert back to St John's Church, Durham Road for GF3 and GF4 and merge GF3 and GF4 on 1.12.2023

Ward/Polling District	From	Comment	Acting Returning Officer Response
Roseworth	Cllrs Jim Beall and Cllr Barbara Inman	<p>Polling district RW3 – Current polling place St Chads - expressed that the previous polling station at Kiora Hall, Ragpath Lane, is available again, and the councillors would like to see if it is possible for us to use that instead to St Chads, as it is more central to the polling district.</p> <p>Polling district RW2 – Current polling place Elim Pentecostal Church there has been a change of name to New Hope Centre</p> <p>Polling District RW1 – proposed polling place to be Ragworth Centre merging current smaller polling districts RW1 and NT3/RW5 - Request to keep the mobile polling station on Rochester Road, rather than use the Ragworth Centre, on the basis of ease accessibility from the larger proportion of the polling district, with low car ownership. Whilst there is a crossing to get across the main road, many of the electors on the north side of the A1207 (Darlington Road area) walk to the polling station.</p> <p>Splitting RW1 with the westerly side using the Hope Centre (Elim Centre) and the easterly side using the reinstated Rochester Road mobile. The streets that would be affected by this move are. Spruce Road Sycamore Grove Elder Grove Birch Grove This would be a total of 146 electors moving to RW2.</p>	<p>Initial contact has been attempted regarding the feasibility of hiring Kiora Hall.</p> <p>Booking form received for 2024 elections still listing polling place as Elim Pentecostal Church – Polling place will be listed as Hope Centre (previously Elim Church)</p> <p>Agree – Mobile station to be continued to be used instead of changing to Ragworth Centre.</p> <p>Agree - Incorporate changes identified placing electors in Spruce Road, Sycamore Grove, Elder grove, Birch Grove into RW2</p>
Whole Area	Acting Returning Officer – Darlington Borough Council	No Comments	Acknowledged

REVISED PROPOSALS

4. The proposals of the Acting Returning Officer, which were included in the consultation, are attached at **Appendix 1**.

COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

5. Accessibility of polling places is a key consideration of the polling district and places review.

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

6. No direct implications.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7. The review is required within 16 months from the 1 October 2023 as per the timings outlined in The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. As a Parliamentary Election is due to be held no later than January 2025, it is beneficial to carry out the review at the earliest opportunity, in preparation of a General Election on the new Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries

RISK ASSESSMENT

8. This report is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.
9. The proposals take in account Parliamentary Constituency Boundary Review final proposals, 2022 Polling District and Polling Place review recommendations, consultation feedback and Electoral Commission Guidance that the number of electors allocated to a particular polling station should not exceed 2,250 not including postal voters.

WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

10. All Councillors have been consulted.

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Background Papers: None
Ward(s) and Ward Councillors: Not Ward Specific
Property Implications: None