

Agenda Item 64.

TITLE	Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2023
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Council on 19 October 2023
WARD	None-specific
LEAD OFFICER	Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director Governance

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To review the boundaries of the Polling Districts and the designated Polling Places to ensure the best possible arrangements are in place for voters.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council agrees:

- 1) to note that a formal review will be undertaken of all Polling Districts and Polling Places within the Borough, as required by legislation,
- 2) that the decisions reached under this review will be implemented for all elections subject to the approval at the Council meeting on 18 January 2024,
- 3) to the setting up of a small Member/Officer working group to review the responses from the consultation received. The working group to consist of one nominated Member from each of the three political groups.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Council has a duty to review the Polling Districts and Polling Places for all areas within the Wokingham Borough in accordance with the Representation of the People Act 1983. The report gives details of how the review of all polling district and polling places within the Wokingham Borough will be carried out.

Background

Under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1983, section 18 as amended by s 17 Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, the Council is required to undertake a review of polling districts, places and stations.

This review must be carried out within 16 months and can start from 1 October 2023 at the earliest.

The Council has in the early part of 2023, been through an Electoral Boundary Review process which reported in July 2023, resulting in new warding arrangements. This has resulted in 18, three member wards. A new parliamentary constituency for Wokingham Borough, Earley & Woodley, has also been created, alongside the existing parliamentary constituency of Wokingham. As a result of this review, the Council must now consider carefully where new Polling districts are needed as a result of the new warding arrangements. Further, where polling stations are best placed within any new polling districts.

A draft schedule is attached at Appendix A, which identifies polling places within the existing electoral arrangements against proposed polling places under the new warding arrangements.

The legislation requires consultation with all MPs, Councillors, Town and Parish Councils, agents, political parties as well as access and disability groups and, of course, electors. A notice of review will be displayed on the Council's website, in the window at the Council offices and also on Town and Parish council notice boards. There will also be a press release issued. The notice will invite people to comment on the current venues used for polling and to make suggestions.

A copy of the Public Consultation Document can be found at Appendix B.

The consultation will start on 20 October 2023 and will end on 17 November 2023. Following the consultation each of the political groups will have an opportunity to discuss the issues raised and put forward their views. A small working group, consisting of representatives from the Council's three political groups will review the responses and seek the views of their respective political group members. All consultation responses will be made available for the public to inspect.

It is anticipated that a final recommendation will go before Council on 18 January 2024. It is intended that any changes will come into force for the elections in May 2024. A formal statutory re-designation notice will be published in the newspaper following the review and this will detail any changes made and the date that these changes will come into effect.

Analysis of Issues

In designating Polling Places, certain rules have to be followed by the Council under the 1983 Act. These include that:

- (i) all electors must be given 'such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances'.
- (ii) so far as is reasonable and practicable, only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled should be designated, and
- (iii) the Polling Place should be within the Polling District except where special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the Polling District.

The **Elections Act 2022** further strengthens these rules, particularly in terms of accessibility for disabled voters:

From May 2023, there are changes which aim to provide greater flexibility and choice in how disabled voters are supported to vote at polling stations.

These changes apply to local elections in England, Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales, and general elections in the UK including recall petitions.

The changes were applied for the first time at the local elections taking place in 230 areas of England in May 2023 and are summarised below.

Disabled voters will be able to choose anyone who is over 18 to accompany them in the polling station to help them vote, including carers who may not themselves be eligible to vote at the election.

There will also be changes to the assistance available at polling stations. From May 2023, Returning Officers will need to take all reasonable steps to provide support for disabled voters at polling stations. This will improve the range and quality of support available and speed up the process of providing additional support where needed.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The review is run by Democratic & Electoral Services staff as part of their ongoing duties. There is sufficient budget to cover the cost of advertising any changes in the local press as required by legislation.

Cross-Council Implications

A new parliamentary constituency will entail the use of polling places we have not utilised before, which may fall outside the Wokingham borough boundary. A risk assessment/or risk assessment information of these venues will need to be sought.

List of Background Papers

Representation of the People Act 1983, section 18 as amended by s 17 Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013
Elections Act 2022

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