

Background

- 1.1 Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, the Council has a duty to divide its area into polling districts and to designate a polling place for each district.
- 1.2 The following definitions may be helpful when reading the report and appendices:-
 - “Polling districts” are geographical electoral areas into which wards and constituencies may be sub-divided.
 - “Polling places” are the buildings or areas designated by the Council where electors in a polling district go to vote in person.
 - “Polling stations” are the number of issuing desks in the building that is the designated polling place.
- 1.3 The Electoral Administration Act 2006, as amended, introduced a duty on all Local Authorities in Great Britain to review their polling districts and polling places at least once every five years. The Council completed the last full review on 21 March 2019. The current statutory review period closes in January 2025.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.6 The review formally commenced on 20 October 2023, and should the recommendations be accepted by Council, it will finish on 18 January 2024. This will allow the changes in polling districts to be reflected on the revised electoral register which is due to be published on 1 February 2024.

Analysis of Issues

- 2.1 Time to conduct the statutory review is severely restricted with scheduled local elections and Parliamentary General elections due to take place within the 16-month review window. Due to the electoral events scheduled to take place, it has been necessary to conduct the review at the earliest opportunity to be able to prepare and administer the 2 May 2024 scheduled local elections as well as the forthcoming UK Parliamentary General election.
- 2.2 Preparatory work was undertaken by Council officers to inform the Returning Officer’s initial proposals which were set out in the consultation.
- 2.3 A small number of the current polling places will not be available in future or are no longer suitable, in these instances, alternative polling places have been proposed. The main issues considered in the development of the Returning Officer’s proposals as set out in the consultation were:

- (a) To identify new polling places in areas where the existing provision is unsuitable or unavailable.
- (b) To consider, as appropriate, feedback received following recent elections raised by members of the public, elected councillors and other stakeholders.
- (c) To ensure, as far as practicable, that any new polling places are accessible to people with disabilities.
- (d) To ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.
- (e) To try to minimise disruption to schools. It should be noted that the Returning Officer has the right in law to select schools as polling venues which places a duty on schools, as publicly funded buildings, to provide the facilities required if asked to do so. However, where alternative premises exist which can provide better facilities for voting, these will be considered.
- (f) To ensure polling stations have sufficient space to allow for checking Voter ID in private.

- 2.4 Further details of the existing polling scheme and the initial proposals for changes were outlined in the Consultation Paper.
- 2.5 The Council gave public notice of the formal commencement of the review on 20 October 2023, and publicised the review via the Council website and social media. Any registered elector was entitled to make representations.
- 2.6 The deadline for responses to the consultation was 19 November 2023. One hundred and seventy three responses were received, commenting on 27 polling districts. A summary of the responses and the Returning Officer's comments is provided in Appendix 1.
- 2.7 As a result of the representations made during the consultation and taking into account the comments of the Councillor Working Group which met on 4 December, the final proposals contain three changes in addition to the initial proposals.
 - ABW will move to polling at Arborfield Village Hall rather than Barkham Village Hall as it is a more convenient location for the majority voters.
 - KER and KARa to both poll at Woodley Baptist Church and KCMA and KFRa to poll at Woodley Airfield as this reduces the distance to polling places for most voters effected.
 - TBM move to polling at Stanlake Pavillion rather than Hurst Village Hall as it is a more convenient location for voters.
- 2.8 Further details of the final proposals and the polling place scheme are set out in Appendix 2. To support the review a map of polling districts is available [Boundary Review \(arcgis.com\)](#)

3. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 3.1 The Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 provides for decisions on polling districts and places to be made by the Council.
- 3.2 Once the Council has made its determination, the conclusion of the review will be published including the reasons for the council's decisions in respect of the designation of polling districts and places.
- 3.3 Certain persons, on specific grounds, can appeal to the Electoral Commission about the alteration of polling places.
- 3.4 The Assistant Director Governance will be responsible for implementing the decisions. Electoral Services will take the measures to bring the changes into effect, making the necessary amendments to the polling districts to take effect from publication of the revised register on 1 February 2024, and putting the new polling place scheme in place for any elections taking place from this point forward.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	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
N/A

Cross-Council Implications
N/A

Public Sector Equality Duty
<p>The Council must seek to ensure that, so far as is reasonable and practical, every polling place for which it is responsible is accessible to people who are disabled.</p> <p>An Equality Impact Assessment can be found at Appendix 3.</p> <p>The actions provide that Presiding Officers will carry out an evaluation of the suitability and accessibility of all polling places and polling stations at the next scheduled election in May 2024. This information will be used to assess if any mitigations are required for</p>

future elections, or if any changes are needed in terms of polling stations or polling places. Further evaluation will then be undertaken at each election.

Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030*

There are no specific impacts on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

Reasons for considering the report in Private Session (Part 2)

Not applicable

List of Background Papers

2023 Polling Places Review – Consultation

[Electoral Commission guidance on the review of polling districts and polling places](#)

Contact Priya Patel, Andrew Moulton

Telephone No Tel: 07747 777298

Service Governance

Email priya.patel@wokingham.gov.uk
andrew.moulton@wokingham.gov.uk

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