

Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) form: Initial impact assessment

If an officer is undertaking a project, policy change or service change, then an initial impact assessment must be completed and attached alongside the Project initiation document.

EqIA Titular information:

Date:	7 December 2023
Service:	Democratic and Electoral Services
Project, policy or service EQIA relates to:	Polling Places Review 2023-24
Completed by:	Priya Patel, Head of Democratic & Electoral Services
Has the EQIA been discussed at services team meeting:	No
Signed off by:	Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director Governance
Sign off date:	7 December 2023

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1. Policy, Project or service information:

This section should be used to identify the main purpose of the project, policy or service change, the method of delivery, including who key stakeholders are, main beneficiaries and any associated aims.

What is the purpose of the project, policy change or service change , its expected outcomes and how does it relate to your services corporate plan:

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

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.

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.

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.

Outline how you are delivering your project, policy change or service change. What governance arrangements are in place, which internal stakeholders (Service managers, Assistant Directors, Members etc) have/will be consulted and informed about the project or changes:

Local Ward Members have been consulted on possible alternative venues and any proposed venues have been reviewed to ensure that they meet the criteria as set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983.

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.

Outline who are the main beneficiaries of the Project, policy change or service change?

A small number of current polling places will not be available in future or are no longer suitable, this has required alternative polling places to be sought. 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.

The main beneficiaries are therefore electors in the Borough and other stakeholders, with their views and comments being central to this work.

Outline any associated aims attached to the project, policy change or service change:

In reviewing 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.

2. Protected characteristics:

There are 9 protected characteristics as defined by the legislation:

- Race
- Gender
- Disability
- Gender re-assignment
- Age
- Religious belief
- Sexual orientation
- Pregnancy/Maternity
- Marriage and civil partnership:

To find out more about the protected groups, please consult the EQIA guidance.

3. Initial Impact review:

In the table below, please indicate whether your project, Policy change or service change will have a positive or negative impact on one of the protected characteristics. To assess the level of impact, please assign each group a Positive, No, Low or High impact score:

For information on how to define No, low or high impact, please consult the EQIA guidance document.

If your project is to have a positive impact on one of the protected groups, please outline this in the table below.

For details on what constitutes a positive impact, please consult the EQIA guidance.

Protected characteristics	Impact score	Please detail what impact will be felt by the protected group:
Race:	No	The review of Polling Places would not affect persons with this protected characteristic specifically.
Gender:	No	The review of Polling Places would not affect persons with this protected characteristic specifically.
Disabilities:	Positive	All venues have been assessed to ensure that they are accessible for people with a disability. Further, each venue will provide the additional support set out in the Elections Act 2022, to ensure that people with a disability are sufficiently supported.
	Negative low impact	Some proposed changes to venues may mean that residents will have to travel further to their polling place, but all polling places remain within polling districts, therefore mitigating any detrimental impact.
Age:	Negative low impact	Some proposed venues may mean that elderly or infirm residents will have to travel further to their polling place. Equally, some proposed venues will be nearer than previously, but all polling places remain within polling districts, therefore mitigating any detrimental impact.
Sexual orientation:	No	The review of Polling Places would not affect persons with this protected characteristic specifically.
Religion/belief:	No	The review of Polling Places would not affect persons with this protected characteristic specifically.
Gender re-assignment:	No	The review of Polling Places would not affect persons with this protected characteristic specifically.
Pregnancy and Maternity:	Positive	All proposed venues are accessible for people using prams or buggies.

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Marriage and civil partnership:	No	The review of Polling Places would not affect persons with this protected characteristic specifically.
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Based on your findings from your initial impact assessment, you must complete a full impact assessment for any groups you have identified as having a low of high negative impact. If No impact, or a positive impact has been identified, you do not need to complete a full assessment. However, you must report on this initial assessment and it must receive formal approval from the Assistant Director responsible for the project, policy or service change.

Initial impact assessment approved by: Andrew Moulton.

Date: 7 December 2023