

Report of:	The Returning Officer
Submitted to:	Corporate Affairs and Audit Committee
Date:	16 February 2023
Title:	Interim Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations
Report for:	Decision
Status:	Public
Strategic priority:	Quality of service
Key decision:	Not applicable
Why:	Choose an item.
Urgent:	No
Why:	Local and Mayoral elections take place on 4 th May 2023

Executive summary

Due to the upcoming local elections, interim changes to polling arrangements are being requested for Central, Longlands and Beechwood and Stainton and Thornton Wards. The changes in Central and Stainton and Thornton Wards are due to an increase in electorate. The changes in Longlands and Beechwood are due to an existing polling place being unavailable. A new polling station will be established in Stainton and Thornton Ward, creating a dual station in Central Ward, and relocating a polling station in Longlands and Beechwood Ward.

The Council are expected to undertake a full Polling places review in 2023 where a consultation exercise will take place before permanent changes are decided.

Purpose

1. To seek Members' agreement to the proposed interim changes to polling district boundaries and the locations of some polling stations.
2. Section 17 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a duty on local authorities to 'carry out and complete' reviews of polling districts and polling places between 1 October 2013 and 31 January 2015, and thereafter every five years. The last review in Middlesbrough took place in October/November 2018.
3. The aim of a review is to seek that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances. The Council must seek to ensure that, so far as is reasonable and practicable, the polling places they are responsible for are accessible to all electors, including those who are disabled, and when considering the designation of a polling place, must have regard to the accessibility needs of disabled persons.
4. Electoral Services also carry out an interim review before every scheduled election to assess regulatory compliance. The review for the combined 2023 elections identified the issues discussed in this report.

Background and relevant information

5. A Polling District is defined as the area created by the division of a constituency, ward or division into smaller parts, within which a polling place can be determined which is convenient to electors. A polling place within a polling district must be designated so that polling stations are within easy reach of all electors from across the polling district. A Polling Station is the room or part of the building where the poll takes place. Unlike polling districts and polling places, which are fixed by the local authority, polling stations are chosen by the Returning Officer for the election.
6. The Returning Officer and the Ward Councillor for Stainton and Thornton Ward have been consulted on the proposed changes.
7. The choice of polling place will often be a balance between the quality (access, facilities, etc.) of a building and the distances between the residents and that building compared to other options for polling places.
8. There is no fixed rule on how to decide how this should be done. Councils should be able to show that they followed a reasonable methodology in arriving at their choice.
9. The Electoral Commission, while not having direct responsibility for the review, can intervene where it considers that the reasonable requirements of electors or the needs of disabled electors have not been taken into account.
10. The Commission recommends that there be no more than 2,500 electors per polling station (excluding electors registered for a postal vote).

11. Since the 2018 review extensive housing development has taken place in the south of the borough. The development in Trimdon Ward was catered for in the 2018 review by the provision of a new mobile station on Jack Simon Way. However, since that review the Hemlington Grange development in Stainton and Thornton Ward has become occupied. The increase in electorate in this ward since December 2018 is shown in Appendix 1.
12. It is therefore proposed to split the current PAM polling district in Stainton and Thornton Ward into two new districts – PAM and PBM. PAM will cover the existing villages of Stainton and Thornton, with electors continuing to vote at the familiar polling station in Stainton Memorial Hall. PBM polling district will cover the new Hemlington Grange development to the east of Stainton Village. Unfortunately, there are no suitable buildings for use as a polling station in this area and so a mobile station is required. Electoral Services and Streetscene staff have visited the area and identified a suitable location at the junction of Hemlington Grange Road and Ravensgill Road. Maps showing the existing and proposed arrangements are in Appendix 2.
13. As a consequence of the above, the existing PBM polling district covering Hemlington Hall estate will be renamed PCM. There will be no change to the polling arrangements in this district.
14. Of the four polling stations in Central Ward, Abingdon Primary school already had the largest electorate. This is due to the polling district being primarily formed of high-density terraced housing. Since the 2018 review a number of student Halls of Residence have opened in this polling district, with another large one under construction. Therefore, the electorate in this polling district is now way in excess of the 2,500 recommended by the Electoral Commission.
15. The current AC polling district in Central ward will be split into two new districts, AC and AD. This is as a result of the introduction of the Elections Act 2022, and the requirement for electors to produce Voter ID, which may have resulted in queues, given the language barriers, when delivering Voter ID guidance and checking Voter ID. Due to the compact nature of both the proposed new districts Abingdon Primary School remains easily accessible from both polling districts and will be familiar to voters from previous elections. Therefore, we do not propose to create a new polling station and intend to make the existing station at Abingdon Primary School a dual station to serve both polling districts.
16. As a consequence of the above, the existing AD polling district will be renamed AE. There will be no change to the polling arrangements in this district.
17. In Longlands and Beechwood Ward we have been notified that the Swerve Tennis Centre is no longer available for use as a polling place. Therefore, the polling place for the GD polling district will be moved from Swerve Table Tennis Centre to the adjacent St Thomas More's Church Hall. A map showing this change is in Appendix 3

What decision(s) are being recommended?

18. That the Corporate Affairs and Audit Committee:

- Agree the creation of an additional polling place to serve the Hemlington Grange development
- Agree the creation of a dual polling station at Abingdon Primary School
- Agree the move of polling place from Swerve Table Tennis Centre to St. Thomas More's Church Hall.

Rationale for the recommended decision(s)

19. The distance by road from the furthest house on the Hemlington Grange development to the existing polling station in Stainton Village Hall is 1.9 miles. This is predominantly along a busy main road with intermittent footpaths and little lighting. Public transport provision in the area is poor. Therefore, an additional polling station to serve this development is considered to be a priority.

20. The electorate of 2,896 at Abingdon Primary school is in excess of the Electoral Commission's recommended maximum of 2,500 and is considered too large to be served by one Presiding Officer, particularly with the challenges presented by the 2022 Elections Act which may be more apparent in this area as a significant proportion of the electorate do not speak English as a first language. Therefore, having two teams of staff available to assist electors will benefit both electors and poll staff. However, the building itself is familiar and easily accessible to all and so there is no need to establish an additional polling place.

21. Swerve Table Tennis Centre, a private building, is no longer available for use as a polling place. St Thomas More's church is located adjacent to Swerve and therefore will only be a minor change for electors in this polling district.

The proposals are recommended for acceptance on an interim basis until the full review is undertaken due between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025. This will allow any considerations to be taken following a Local Government Electoral Ward Boundary Review which is also due to commence in September 2023.

22. It is proposed that Electoral Services deliver an awareness programme to ensure that all electors are aware of any changes to their usual polling station.

Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)

Legal

23. Carrying out and completing this review ensures that the Council meets its obligations under Section 17 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.

Strategic priorities and risks

24. Recommendations will improve access for protected groups by providing more resources and reducing travel times. New provisions in the Elections Act will also improve accessibility for those with disabilities and voting in private.

Human Rights, Equality and Data Protection

25. There are no issues to note on these areas as part of this report.

Financial

26. In the period until the next full Polling Districts and Places review in October 2023 there is one scheduled set of elections which will affect the whole borough – combined Mayoral / Local / Parish on 4th May 2023. This does not include any by-elections or unscheduled referendums or Parliamentary elections.

27. The cost of providing a station in a public building is approximately £800 per election, and for a mobile station approximately £1600. The costs of providing an extra set of staff and equipment to make an existing station a dual station would be approximately £600. Therefore, the cost of providing one additional mobile and one dual station for the May 2023 election will be approximately £2200.

Actions to be taken to implement the recommended decision(s)

Action	Responsible Officer	Deadline
Electoral Services to deliver an awareness programme to ensure all electors are aware of their new polling station.	John Stuart	Election day 4 th May 2023

Appendices

1	Electorate in Stainton and Thornton Ward 2018-2022
2	Current and proposed polling arrangements, Stainton and Thornton Ward
3	Location of Swerve Table Tennis Centre and St Thomas More's Church

Background papers

Body	Report title	Date
HM Government	Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013	2013
The Electoral Commission	Circular EC19/2010	2010

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