

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

Report of:	Charlotte Benjamin, Returning Officer
Submitted to:	Corporate Affairs Committee
Date:	23 January 2024
Title:	Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations
Report for:	Decision
Status:	Public
Council Plan priority:	Delivering Best Value
Key decision:	No
Why:	Not applicable
Subject to call in?:	No
Why:	Not applicable

Executive summary

During Summer 2024 polling places in all wards were reviewed. Changes are proposed in Ladgate and Nunthorpe wards. We are also seeking approval for changes already made in Longlands and Beechwood ward.

1. Purpose

- 1.1 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 and the next one must be completed by 31st January 2025. As an interim review was completed in 2022 (see below), Electoral Services considered it appropriate to carry out the next review following the scheduled combined Police and Crime Commissioner / Tees Valley Mayoral Elections on 2nd May 2024. The review was further delayed by the short notice UK Parliamentary Election held on 4th July 2024.
- 1.2 It was originally intended that the revised polling arrangements would be introduced for any elections after 1st September 2024. Following the delays referenced above we now intend to introduce these from 1st February 2025.

1.3 The aim of the 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.

2. Recommendations

That the Corporate Affairs Committee

- In Longlands and Beechwood ward, approve the use of St Chad's Church as the polling place for polling district GC and Beech Grove Primary School as the polling place for polling district GD
- In Ladgate ward, approve amendments to the polling district boundaries so every elector living north of Ladgate Lane votes at Easterside Community Hub and those living south of Ladgate Lane vote at Marton Manor Primary School
- In Nunthorpe, approve the combination of polling districts TAM and TBM into a single polling district TAM with a polling place at Nunthorpe Methodist Church on Connaught Road. Rename the existing TCM polling district to TBM and relocate the polling place from Chandlers Ridge Academy to the new community centre once this opens.

3. Rationale for the recommended decision(s)

3.1 The changes in Longlands and Beechwood are required due to buildings previously being used as polling places becoming unavailable for use.

3.2 The changes in Ladgate ward are due to recent changes in parliamentary constituency boundaries meaning we no longer need to operate three polling stations in this ward. We also recognise that electors in the new developments in the west of the ward will have an easier journey to the polling station at Marton Manor Primary School rather than their existing station at Easterside Community Hub.

3.3 The changes in Nunthorpe are in response to the strong feedback from the local community and representatives as a result of this review.

4. Background and relevant information

4.1 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 is defined as the building or area in which polling stations will be selected by the Returning Officer. A Polling Station is the room or part of the building where the poll takes place. These are chosen by the Returning Officer for the election.

4.2 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.

- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 The Commission recommends that there be no more than 2,500 electors per polling station (excluding electors registered for a postal vote).
- 4.6 Consideration was given to the cost to the Council of further polling stations. A polling station currently costs approximately £800 to hire, equip and staff for polling day, with a mobile station costing approximately double this figure.
- 4.7 Consideration was given to any further development in the borough in terms of new build residential properties and demolitions.
- 4.8 Another key issue for the Council is that when conducting the review, all decisions made must have been consulted upon, measured and practical. The whole process should be as transparent and open as possible to avoid possible conflict.
- 4.9 Electoral Services wrote to all current councillors in May 2024 giving the background to the review and asking for initial observations to inform our proposals before these went to public consultation.
- 4.10 As required, the first stage of the review was giving notice. A notice was published on the Council's website in May 2024
- 4.11 Information was provided on the council's website to inform the public about how to comment on their polling stations.
- 4.12 In line with the recommendations of the Electoral Commission, letters and questionnaires were sent to local Members of Parliament and Middlesbrough Councillors.
- 4.13 A summary of comments received during the consultation period are given at Appendix 1.
- 4.14 Feedback from electors, Polling Station staff, Polling Station Inspectors and Polling Station Managers was also considered from recent elections.
- 4.15 Streetscene were approached and consulted in relation to access issues with mobile Polling Stations.

- 4.16 Once agreed, details of new polling arrangements will be displayed on the Council's website along with a "Find My Polling Station" postcode lookup facility. There will also be a prominent message on all poll cards prior to the forthcoming election.
- 4.17 The next scheduled elections in Middlesbrough are combined local / mayoral elections in May 2027. The Local Boundary Commission for England is currently consulting on a review of electoral boundaries within Middlesbrough, and these changes will come into effect at the May 2027 elections, with another full review of polling places being necessary before this date as a result of these changes. Therefore, any changes made as a result of this current review are only likely to be used for any ad-hoc or by elections prior to May 2027.

Changes since the last Review

- 4.18 Due to changes in the buildings available to us, and in response to housing development in the borough, a non-statutory review was carried out in 2022 ahead of the May 2023 Local/Mayoral Elections. This review established a new polling station to serve the Hemlington Grange development in Stainton and Thornton ward, made Abingdon Primary School in Central ward a dual polling station, and relocated a polling station in Longlands and Beechwood ward from Swerve Table Tennis Centre to the adjacent St. Thomas More's Church Hall.
- 4.19 After the 2023 elections we were informed that the long standing polling place at the Sutton Centre in Longlands and Beechwood ward would no longer be available. Therefore for the 2024 elections St. Chad's Church on Keith Road was used.
- 4.20 Following the 2nd May 2024 elections we were informed that St. Thomas More's Church would no longer be available for use as a polling place. For the 4th July 2024 election Beech Grove Primary School on Beechwood Avenue was used.
- 4.21 For the July 4th election the International Centre in Central ward was unavailable as it was undergoing refurbishment, therefore the former polling station at Elder Court was used for this election only. We intend to return this station to the International Centre once the refurbishment is complete.

Feedback Received in this Review

- 4.22 No comments were received in respect of Acklam, Ayresome, Coulby Newham, Kader, Linthorpe, Marton East, Newport, North Ormesby, Park, Park End and Beckfield and Trimdon wards. Additionally Electoral Services have not identified any issues with the current arrangements in these wards so no changes to the polling places in these wards are proposed.
- 4.23 In Berwick Hills and Pallister ward following the 2nd May elections both the Presiding Officer and Polling Station Inspector raised concerns about the ability of the station at Berwick Hills Primary School to cope with a larger turnout. Since then the station has been used for the UK Parliamentary election with a substantially increased turnout without issue, so we do not intend to take any action at this location.

- 4.24 In Brambles and Thorntree ward concerns were raised from a Polling Station Inspector regarding access at Thorntree Primary School. Streetscene and Electoral Services carried out a site visit before the Parliamentary election and this was resolved so no further action is necessary.
- 4.25 In Central ward a ward councillor asked us to keep using St. Aidan's Meeting Room as a polling station as this is convenient for electors in the local area. We have no plans to stop using St. Aidan's Meeting Room.
- 4.26 In Hemlington ward the Polling Station Inspector pointed out that The Oaks Community Centre is listed as Otterhill Court on poll cards. Having investigated we have found both names are correct, and so we have changed the wording on the poll cards to "Otterhill Court, The Oaks".
- 4.27 In Ladgate ward feedback was received from an elector who lives in the Ladgate Woods / Orchard Gardens development that they did not want to use the polling station in Easterside Community Hub. This area was previously linked with Easterside for polling purposes due to the boundary of the previous parliamentary constituencies. Following the recent review of parliamentary boundaries this anomaly has been removed. There are no suitable buildings in the new development to use as a polling station. Therefore we intend to retain the same 2 polling places in Ladgate Ward but expand the current MCM polling district (which will be renamed MAM) so voters in the new development in future vote at Marton Manor Primary School. This will give voters from Ladgate Woods/Orchard Gardens a slightly shorter journey to the polling station. Voters in the current MBM polling district will continue to vote at Easterside Community Hub, this polling district will also be expanded slightly to include the small number of properties west of Easterside but north of Ladgate Lane who already vote at Easterside Community Hub. This will remove the need for a dual station at the Community Hub whilst ensuring the electorate at both stations remains within the 2500 recommended limit.
- 4.28 In Marton West ward concerns were raised about the size of the mobile station on Fulford Way, and its ability to cope with a larger turnout. We are limited by the space available to locate a mobile station and the size of portacabin available for hire. We will continue to request the largest available portable building for this location.
- 4.29 Also in Marton West ward, several members of the public raised concerns about Lingfield Primary school being used as a polling station, and the school choosing to close on election days. This school has been used for many years without issue. There are no other public buildings, including shops, pubs etc. in this polling district or indeed nearby without crossing into neighbouring wards. It would be possible to combine this polling station with the neighbouring station at Normanby Court whilst remaining within the 2500 elector limit. However this would mean a much longer journey to the polling station for electors who currently vote at Lingfield Primary School. Therefore the feedback is noted but we propose to continue using Lingfield Primary School as a polling station.
- 4.30 In Nunthorpe ward a lot of negative feedback was received concerning the use of schools as polling stations. All three polling stations in this ward are currently located in primary schools, with one school (The Avenue Primary) hosting two stations. Feedback

was also received from Nunthorpe Parish Council and both ward councillors along similar lines. The Parish Council and one ward councillor also pointed out that a lot of development has taken place in the south of the ward, in polling district TCM. Electors in this polling district currently vote at Chandlers Ridge Academy, and this involves a long journey for electors in the south of the polling district.

4.31 To remove the two stations currently at The Avenue Primary School we propose merging polling districts TAM and TBM and establishing one new polling station to serve this area. This station would still be under the 2500 elector limit. We intend to approach the Methodist Church on Connaught Road with a view to locating the combined polling station there. Should the Church refuse we will have no alternative but to continue to use The Avenue Primary School as a single polling station.

4.32 A community centre is under construction on Stokesley Road which will be ideally located to serve the new developments in the south of the ward. We believe this is due to open in 2025, i.e. before the next scheduled elections. Once this opens we propose moving the station for polling district TAM from Chandlers Ridge Academy to the new community centre.

4.33 In Stainton and Thornton ward feedback was received from parents and school staff regarding the use of Hemlington Hall Academy. In addition we recognise that the facilities at this location are not ideal for a polling station. However this is a small polling district with no other public buildings. It is also cut off from the rest of Stainton and Thornton ward by a busy main road so there is little option to relocate the polling station or combine the polling district with a neighbouring station. Therefore the feedback is noted but we intend to continue using Hemlington Hall Academy as a polling station.

5. Other potential alternative(s) and why these have not been recommended

5.1 Several people who responded to the review asked for the introduction of more mobile stations, usually to replace an existing station in a school. A mobile station is typically a converted shipping container or other portacabin structure which is sited for the election and removed afterwards. Our policy is to only use mobile stations as a last resort for the following reasons:

- Poor accessibility, especially for voters with mobility difficulties
- Poor facilities for poll staff who are confined to the station for 15 hours
- Cost. Hiring, locating and equipping a mobile station costs more than twice as much as locating a polling station in an existing building
- Disruption and detriment to the environment for local residents and businesses where the station and associated portable toilet are located.

Therefore we will not use a mobile station where a suitable alternative building is available.

6. Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)

Topic	Impact
Financial (including procurement and Social Value)	The cost of providing a station in a public building is approximately £800 per election, and for a mobile station approximately £1600. Therefore the proposed removal of

	two fixed stations would save approximately £1600 per election.
Legal	Carrying out and completing this review ensures that the Council meets its obligations under Section 17 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.
Risk	N/A
Human Rights, Public Sector Equality Duty and Community Cohesion	N/A
Climate Change / Environmental	N/A
Children and Young People Cared for by the Authority and Care Leavers	N/A
Data Protection	N/A

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

Action	Responsible Officer	Deadline
Electoral Services will deliver an awareness programme to ensure all electors are familiar with their new polling station. This would include a “find my polling station” postcode lookup on the Council’s website and prominent information on the next poll card delivered.	John Stuart	By the date of the next election or referendum held after 1 February 2025.

Appendices

1	Summary of comments received during consultation
2	Maps showing proposed changes following consultation
3	List of proposed polling places

Background papers

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

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