

**COUNCIL
23 NOVEMBER 2023**

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS, POLLING PLACES AND POLLING STATIONS

REPORT OF: Democratic Services Manager/(Acting) Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations – Non-Executive function
(Electoral Services: Community & Partnerships)

COUNCIL PRIORITY: PEOPLE FIRST / SUSTAINABILITY / A BRIGHTER FUTURE TOGETHER

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 To outline and report on the outcome of the Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations consultation, following a review required by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1. That Council designates the Polling Districts and Polling Places as per the Returning Officer's Proposals attached as Appendix A to the submitted report, effective as of 1 December 2023.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary Polling Districts and Polling Places. The next compulsory review is required to commence and conclude between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025 (inclusive).

3.2 However, as the Local Government Boundary Commission for England has implemented new district ward boundary arrangements for elections in May 2024, the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations need to reflect these new boundaries in the Register of Electors published annually on 1 December.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1 The Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations is a statutory requirement, so no alternative has been considered.

4.2 However, when designating each polling district and polling place, alternative options have been considered where available. In each case, the options are outlined in Appendix A.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

5.1 When conducting the review, the Council must:

- Consult the (Acting) Returning Officer for every parliamentary constituency which is wholly or partly in North Hertfordshire; and
- Seek representations from electors and other interested persons and bodies including elected representatives and such persons that have a particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability.

5.2 The Notice of Review was published on 2 October 2023 on the Council's website and at the District Council Offices, as well as being distributed to each parish for display and included within the Members' Information Services (MIS). Publication of the Notice of Review formally commenced the consultation period which concluded on 30 October 2023.

5.3 The consultation gave respondents the opportunity to make representations on the Returning Officer's draft proposals for the arrangement of polling districts, polling places and polling stations. In total 187 consultation responses were received via the online survey.

5.4 A Briefing Note was circulated via MIS, the Council's Communications Team publicised the Review via a Press Release and social media channels and emails were circulated to contacts including the Council's Citizens Panel, MPs and other elected members and disability groups in the North Herts area.

5.5 A Briefing Note was produced and circulated to all Members to assist with any constituent queries.

5.6 A Member Briefing was held on 16 October 2023 to discuss the proposals and alternatives. Subsequently there were additional meetings and ward specific discussions with Members. The presentation was circulated to all Members following the Briefing. Prior to the commencement of the formal consultation, Members were canvassed for their opinion regarding existing polling places.

5.7 Whilst formulating proposals, consideration was given to the evaluation forms that Polling Station Inspectors complete for each polling station as well as the most recent post-election staff survey that included questions on the quality and accessibility of the polling stations.

5.8 The representations received during the consultation are summarised in Appendix B.

5.9 The Acting Returning Officer for the Stevenage constituency was invited to make comments on the proposals and the response received is included at Appendix C.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. The Council must conduct a review of Parliamentary Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations every 5 years. The statutory review period for the current review is between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025.
- 7.2 The Boundary Commission for England (BCE) recently concluded a review of parliamentary constituency boundaries, with the new boundaries set to be in place at the next UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE). The Review must therefore account for the new parliamentary constituency boundaries, as well as the existing constituencies, in the event of a Parliamentary By-Election before the next UK Parliamentary General Election, which would be on the existing parliamentary boundary arrangements.
- 7.3 Although this review is technically concerned with Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations for Parliamentary Elections, in practice, the Council needs to designate Polling Districts which are compatible with local government elections so that the Electoral Register can be structured in a way that enables all election types to be delivered.
- 7.4 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has recently implemented new district ward boundary arrangements for North Herts Council, to take effect from the elections in May 2024.
- 7.5 As a result, the review must account for the boundary changes at both parliamentary and local elections and must be concluded in time for the publication of the revised Register of Electors on 1 December 2023, so that North Hertfordshire has agreed and functioning polling districts and polling places ready to be used at the scheduled local elections in May 2024, as well as the next UK Parliamentary General Election which must take place by January 2025.
- 7.6 For the purposes of clarification, the definitions of a polling district, polling place and polling station are:

Polling District – a geographical area created by sub-dividing an electoral area. All wards within North Hertfordshire are divided into polling districts, which form the basis upon which the register of electors is produced. Unless there are special circumstances, each parish must be in a separate polling district.

Polling Place - the designated areas where electors for a particular polling district go to vote in person (i.e the place in which a polling station is located). In the absence of any legal definition, this can be regarded as widely as a polling district or as narrowly as the building in which a polling station is located.

Polling Station - the actual area where the process of voting takes place, e.g. a room within a community centre.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 A Polling District can only be in one parish / ward / division / constituency (i.e. an electoral boundary line cannot cross through a polling district).
- 8.2 Each Polling District is allocated with a polling place and a polling station which the electors within the given polling district visit to vote at election time.
- 8.3 Polling places should be within the relevant Polling District unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area outside the district (for example, if no polling place can be identified in the district). Where this is the case, it has been noted in the Returning Officer comments in Appendix A.
- 8.4 The Polling Places proposed have been based on an assessment of the available options and the accessibility of the respective venues.
- 8.5 As per paragraphs 7.2 - 7.4, the BCE and the LGBCE have recently completed electoral reviews of parliamentary constituency boundaries and the district ward boundaries of North Hertfordshire respectively. Their recommendations are to take effect from the next UK Parliamentary General Election in the case of parliamentary constituencies and from the scheduled May 2024 elections for district ward boundaries.
- 8.6 As part of the LGBCE boundary review, there were also changes to the boundaries of Royston Town Council and Bygrave Parish Council, which again take effect from their next scheduled elections – May 2026 for Royston Town Council and May 2027 for Bygrave Parish Council – and have been reflected in the proposals. In the case of Royston, the existing Town Council boundaries have also been accounted for in the event of a by-election before May 2026.
- 8.7 Appendix A sets out the proposals for each Polling District on a ward-by-ward basis, in each case detailing any comments from the Returning Officer on the proposals, as well as a summary of the consultation responses received and alternative options that were considered.
- 8.8 To be able to produce copies of the Register of Electors on the existing ward boundaries prior to the May 2024 elections (as well as the new boundaries), 7 Polling Districts have been temporarily split along the boundary lines of the old district wards and will be merged following the 2024 elections once they are no longer required. The 7 (temporarily 14) Polling Districts affected are as follows and have been marked with the suffix A or B:
 - H-HBE-5A & H-HBE-5B will be merged into H-HBE-5
 - N-LNR-1A & N-LNR-1B will be merged into N-LNR-1
 - N-LNR-2A & N-LNR-2B will be merged into N-LNR-2
 - N-LNR-3A & N-LNR-3B will be merged into N-LNR-3
 - N-LSE-1A & N-LSE-1B will be merged into N-LSE-1
 - N-LSE-2A & N-LSE-2B will be merged into N-LSE-2
 - N-LWI-1A & N-LWI-1B will be merged into N-LWI-1

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. 4.4.1 (q) of the Functions of the Full Council states that Council must *'agree proposals for the compulsory polling districts, polling places and polling stations reviews, district boundaries, electoral wards and the number of District Councillors'*.
- 9.2. Sections 18A – 18E and Schedule A1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 provides the statutory requirements of the polling review.
- 9.3. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places.
- 9.4. The Review is compulsory and must be concluded by 31 January 2025.
- 9.5. Although statutorily the Council has until 31 January 2025 to conclude the Review, a decision to designate the Polling Districts and Polling Places is required forthwith, to take account of the district ward boundary review by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, resulting in changes to Ward boundaries and the numbers of councillors per ward in North Herts, changes to the parliamentary constituency boundaries and the uncertainty of when the next General election will be. As a result, changes need to be reflected in the Register of Electors published on the 1 December in preparation of the forthcoming elections on the new boundaries.
- 9.6. Subsequent compulsory reviews must commence and conclude within the period of 16 months on 1 October every fifth year (i.e. the next review must commence on 1 October 2028).

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. The Electoral Commission recommends ratios when allocating electors and staff to Polling Stations and as the population of the district, and consequently the number of electors increase as new residential developments proceed, will mean new polling stations may be required and therefore have ongoing cost implications.
- 10.2. The anticipated costs of the various elections are taken into account during the annual budget setting process.
- 10.3. For contested Town/Parish/County Council elections the costs are recharged to the respective authority (unless a year when a District Council election or any other election is held in which case the costs are proportioned between the respective Councils). The introduction of an uncontested Town/Parish fee is part of a separate report 'Electoral Services – Scales of Fees 2024/25'.
- 10.4. For national polls the government issues a Fees and Charges schedule which identifies for each authority a "maximum recoverable amount" and subsequently claims are made to the Cabinet Office for reimbursement of the fees incurred i.e. Parliamentary/Police and Crime Commissioner elections. Claims can take a long time to determine and the Council does not always receive the full amount submitted. As in paragraph 10.3, the cost of national polls is shared if other elections are combined.

- 10.5 Following the polling district review and as a result of the district ward boundary review and the number of electors, the Council will require 80 polling stations for an all out election. The last time that elections were held district wide in 2021, 82 stations were required, meaning the Returning Officer will need to recruit less polling station staff (2 Presiding Officers and 4 Poll Clerks less) equating to a saving of £1,588 excluding any venue hire charges or other associated costs.
- 10.6 The district elections in 2024 will be combined with the Police and Crime Commissioner elections, therefore the costs will be shared between the two election types and the cost attributable to the district will be half of the amount and therefore less than the overall costs in 2023 when the district elections were standalone.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. The Council needs to ensure it complies with statutory requirements. If the Council opted to not designate the Polling Districts and Polling Places at this meeting, would result in the need to re-publish the Register of Electors again in February, which aside from the significant cost implications, would have severe repercussions on the Electoral Services Team regarding preparations for the forthcoming elections. This is in addition to the extra burdens already being placed on the Team due to the changes imposed via the Elections Act 2022.
- 11.1. Following conclusion of the review, certain persons have a right to make representations to the Electoral Commission. If, on receipt of such representations, the Electoral Commission finds that the Council did not:
- Meet the reasonable requirements of the electors in the constituency, or
 - Take sufficient account of the accessibility for disabled persons of a polling station within a designated polling place.

The Electoral Commission may direct the Council to make any alteration to the polling place as deemed necessary, and if the alterations are not enacted within 2 months, the Electoral Commission may make the alterations themselves.

- 11.3 The requirement to undertake the review, including the associated consultation, provides the Council with the opportunity to assess the suitability of polling arrangements, to ensure that facilities provided are accessible to all and do not present any barriers to people's participation in elections.
- 11.4 Between compulsory reviews, all polling places and polling stations are evaluated as to their sustainability at each election.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. As part of the review the Council must:

- Seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in the local authority area have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.
- Seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled.

12.3 The consultation clearly sets out the rationale for the locations of the polling places/stations with clear consideration of accessibility.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report. However, as a Polling Place must be an area within the district (unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the district) a local provider will usually be used to deliver this.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

14.1. There are no known Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to this report.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

15.1 Staffing an election can be highly resource intensive. Dependent on the type of election requirements differ, for instance, a By-election or Neighbourhood Plan Referendum requires less resource than the forthcoming District election or a Parliamentary election. However, in terms of this report, other than officer time required to consult and collate/review proposals and research alternative locations, there are no human resource implications.

16. APPENDICES

16.1 Appendix A – Review of Polling Districts, Places and Stations 2023 – Returning Officer Proposals

16.2 Appendix B 1 – Online Survey Responses
Appendix B 2 – Other Responses

16.3 Appendix C – Response from Acting Returning Officer for Stevenage Constituency

17. CONTACT OFFICERS

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 When conducting the review, North Herts Council used the guidance and resources published by the Electoral Commission:

[Reviews of polling districts, polling places and polling stations | Electoral Commission](#)
- 18.2 Council's Website 'Polling District Review' page:

[Polling District Review | North Herts Council \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](#)