
POLLING DISTRICT, POLLING PLACE AND POLLING STATION REVIEW 2018

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Stephen Harker, Leader of the Council,
and Cabinet Member with the Efficiency and Resources Portfolio**

Responsible Director - Paul Wildsmith, Managing Director

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To report the outcome of a recent review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations for the Darlington and Sedgefield Parliamentary Constituencies.

Summary

2. The Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, places a duty on all local authorities in England and Wales to undertake and complete a review of all of the Polling Districts and Polling Places in its area.
3. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 specified the timing of compulsory reviews of the UK Parliamentary Polling Districts and Polling Places, with the next compulsory review due to be started and completed between 1 October 2018 and 31 January 2020 (inclusive).
4. As the last Polling District, Polling Place and Polling Station Review was held in 2014, and in order to ensure that our Polling Places and Polling Stations remained fit for purpose ahead of the Local Government Elections in 2019, it was determined that the next Polling District, Polling Place and Polling Station Review should commence at the earliest opportunity, that being 1 October 2018.
5. Conducting the review at this time provides the earliest opportunity to address the recommendations made in the report produced by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK following their UK Parliamentary (General) Election Assessment Mission in 2017, and the observations made by Democracy Volunteers at the same election. It also allows sufficient time polling stations to be reserved for the elections on 2 May 2019.

6. Undertaking the review at this time also allows the Council to proactively respond to the recommendations contained within the 2018 Parliamentary Boundary Review, which were submitted to Government on 5 September 2018.

Recommendation

7. Council are requested to:-
 - (a) Note and approve the changes proposed to the existing Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations ahead of the Local Elections in May 2019 **(Appendix D)**;
 - (b) Endorse the recommendations of the Returning Officer in relation to Polling Districts and Polling Places that will come into being should the recommendations of the Parliamentary Boundary Review be approved, and request that Officers implement the recommendations accordingly; and
 - (c) Authorise the publication of the proposals for Polling Places.

Reasons

8. The reasons for the request are to:-
 - (a) To comply with the requirements of the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.
 - (b) To enable the decisions to be made, publicised and implemented in good time for the elections scheduled for May 2019.

Paul Wildsmith
Managing Director

Background Papers

- (i) 'Reviews of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations': The Electoral Commission.
- (ii) Equality and Human Right Law during an Election Period. April 2017. Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Paul Dalton: Extension 5805

S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for crime and disorder.
Health and Well Being	There are no issues relating to health and wellbeing which this report needs to address.
Carbon Impact	There are no issues relating to carbon impact.
Diversity	All polling places have been assessed to ensure that they are accessible for voters who have a disability.
Wards Affected	The proposals affect all wards.
Groups Affected	The proposals do not affect any specific group.
Budget and Policy Framework	The report does not change the Council's budget or Policy framework but needs to be considered by Council
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an executive decision.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	There are no links.
Efficiency	There are no efficiency proposals identified as part of this review.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

9. The Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, placed a duty on all local authorities in England and Wales to undertake and complete a compulsory review of all of the Polling Districts and Polling Places in its area within a prescribed period. The relevant prescribed period for the review required it to be started and completed between 1 October 2018 and 31 January 2020 (inclusive).
10. The scope of the review only allows for Polling District boundaries and Polling Places to be changed, and does not permit changes to Ward, County, Parish and Parliamentary Electoral boundaries.
11. Local authorities must comply with a number of legislative requirements in relation to the designation of Polling Districts and Polling Places. Each parish in England should be a separate Polling District, unless special circumstances apply.
12. Local authorities must designate a Polling Place for each Polling District, unless the size or other circumstances of a Polling District are such that the situation of the Polling Stations does not materially affect the convenience of the electors.

13. A Polling Place must be within the Polling District unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate somewhere outside of the Polling District (for example, if no accessible Polling Place can be identified within the District). This may be the case in rural areas where suitable premises can be few and far between.
14. Local authorities must also comply with certain access requirements, and as part of the review they 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, and ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every Polling Place is accessible to electors who are disabled.
15. In determining that every Polling Place, and prospective Polling Place, is accessible to disabled voters, local authorities should give due consideration to the requirements of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission.
16. In the report, 'Polls Apart 2010: Opening Elections to Disabled People', produced by SCOPE in 2010, it was made clear that access is still a barrier to some disabled people who want to cast their vote in person. Some of the main physical access issues identified by SCOPE, which were taken into consideration as part of this review, were Polling Places and Polling Stations with steps into the entrance, or being otherwise inaccessible, narrow doorways and corridors, lack of space for motorised wheelchair manoeuvrability, and a lack of space and secrecy for the elector and their companion to discuss the elector's choice of vote.
17. Whilst the Review itself could not formally commence until 1 October 2018, the Electoral Commission did permit local authorities to undertake preparatory work ahead of the review period, including research about the geography and demographics of the area, examining the suitability of existing buildings, and conducting work to identify and consider potential alternative buildings. With this in mind, staff from the Elections Team inspected a number of Polling Places during the summer months, and an invitation was extended to Members to contribute at an early stage.
18. Consideration was also initially given to reducing the number of proposed Polling Places, however in light of indications provided by the Cabinet Office to introduce a voter identification requirement, potentially within the lifetime of this review period, it was deemed prudent to retain the same number of Polling Places.

Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations

19. Ahead of the start of the review, on 25 September 2018 details of the review were published on the news page of the Council's website and also on the Council's social media profiles. A Press Release was also issued, and appeared in The Northern Echo and the Darlington and Stockton Times on 29 September 2018, advising of the forthcoming review.

20. A Notice advising of the formal start of the review was placed on the Council's website (**Appendix A**) on 1 October 2018. All Members of the Council, local political groups, the Members of Parliament (MPs) for the constituencies of Darlington and Sedgfield, the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) for the North East Region, Parish Councils, Darlington Association on Disability, and a number of community groups were also advised that a review was taking place, and that representations could be made accordingly.
21. Those minded to submit representations which objected to the current Polling Place were encouraged to suggest alternative venues within the Polling District. In addition, Presiding Officers, Polling Station Inspectors, stakeholders and residents of the Borough were invited to comment. Representations were invited in writing and via e-mail, with information placed on the Council's website (<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/your-council/democracy/elections-and-electoral-registration/polling-districts-polling-places-and-polling-stations-review-2018/>) and social media profiles.
22. The initial consultation period ran from 1 to 14 October 2018, and encouraged respondents to comment on the initially proposed Polling Districts and Polling Places (**Appendix B**), or make suggestions as to alternative provision.
23. The initial proposals did not recommend any changes to Polling Districts, as the current boundaries are well-defined and reflect natural boundaries within each area (main thoroughfares, railway lines, rivers, etc.). We have not been informed of any major obstacles in place that would prohibit electors from reaching their Polling Place.
24. The initial proposals included a number of changes affecting Polling Places:
 - (a) The initial proposals responded to strong objections previously received in relation to the use of Gurney Pease Academy from the Head Teacher at the school, and the Educational Trust responsible for the School. In previous reviews there were no alternative premises suitable within Polling District STA, however work has now been undertaken at St. James The Great Church Hall, and the premises now comply with the access requirements expected of a Polling Place. The initial proposals therefore reflected a change from Gurney Pease Academy to St. James The Great Church Hall, which is better situated for the majority of electors within Polling District STA, allowed for a provision of car parking not available at the School, and ensured that the School could retain its nursery provision on Polling Days.
 - (b) Due to changes in service provision, Dodmire Children's Centre no longer exists and the building previously used for the provision of this service has reverted back to the use of Rydal Academy. Rydal Academy has agreed to provide the same space previously used at Dodmire Children's Centre as a Polling Station.

- (c) Likewise, Mount Pleasant Children's Centre no longer exists, and use of the building has reverted back to Mount Pleasant Primary School. Unfortunately, it is now no longer possible to use the same area within the school, however Mount Pleasant Primary School has agreed to relocate the Polling Station elsewhere on site. The Polling Station will now be situated in the 'Little Learners' Nursery. Both options enable the schools to remain operational on Polling Days.
- (d) Branksome Community Centre has now been leased to The Redeemed Christian Church of God, however arrangements have been made with the Church to continue with use of the building as a Polling Place on Polling Days. The initial proposals also reflected this consequential changes.

Representations Received

- 25. During the initial consultation stage, representations were received from one Deputy Head Teacher, and two Electors (the representations received are outlined in **Appendix C**).
- 26. Following this initial stage of consultation, Officers gave consideration to the representations received, conducted further premises inspections, and prepared draft recommendations for the existing boundaries, and also prepared draft recommendations based on the potential new Parliamentary Boundary arrangements, being considered by the Government following the completion of the 2018 Parliamentary Boundary Review.
- 27. The representations received made no comments in terms of the proposed Polling District boundaries.

Representation 1 – Hurworth Primary School

- 28. A representation was received from an elector living in Hurworth, who objected to Hurworth Primary School being used as a Polling Place due to the fact that the School closed causing children to miss a day of their education.
- 29. It is appreciated that the closure of any school causes huge disruption to staff, parents and children alike, and therefore only seeks to use a school where it is the best, or only, solution within a Polling District. The decision to close any school used as a Polling Place is made solely by the Head Teacher of that school, and not the Returning Officer.
- 30. The Representation of the People Act 1983 allows the Returning Officer to use schools and public rooms, free of charge, for the purposes of taking the poll.

Use of schools and public rooms

22 (1) The Returning Officer may use, free of charge, for the purpose of taking the poll –

(a) a room in a school to which this rule applies;

(b) a room the expense of maintaining which is payable out of any rate. This rule applies –

(i) in England and Wales, to a school maintained or assisted by a local education authority or a school in respect of which grants are made out of moneys provided by Parliament to the person or body of persons responsible for the management of the school.

31. This does not necessarily mean that a school must close, and the Elections Team have worked closely with schools and colleges across the Borough in an attempt to keep many schools fully, or partially, open, where suitable safeguarding arrangements can be implemented. Indeed, Carmel College, Mount Pleasant Primary School, Mowden Junior School, Northwood Primary School, Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, Reid Street Primary School, Rydal Academy, West Park Academy and Whinfield Primary School, will all remain fully, or partially, open on Polling Day, whilst being used as a Polling Place.

32. Guidance received from the Department for Education states:

“Schools which need to close as a result of being used as Polling Stations can move to alternative accommodation or make up the lost day by other means. The lost day could be made up at the beginning or end of a term, or a training day could be arranged on the day of the poll if the head teacher or governors so wish.”

33. As the school remains central to the main residential area with the Polling District, and as no further suitable venues within the Polling District were proposed as part of the representation received, we continued to propose that Hurworth Primary School serve as the Polling Place in Polling District HUB.

Representation 2 – St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall (Longfield Academy)

34. A representation was received from a resident of the Ridgeway, who proposed that Longfield Academy be used as a Polling Place to serve Polling District NRA, and claimed that there was no public transport available to attend the Polling Place at St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall.

35. Ridgeway is situated within the North Road Ward, whereas the proposed Polling Place of Longfield Academy is situated in the Harrowgate Hill Ward. Guidance states that a Polling Place must be within the Polling District unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate somewhere outside of the Polling District. In this case, it would be designating somewhere within a different Ward.

36. Longfield Academy is not currently used as a Polling Place within the Harrowgate Hill Ward (D.S.R.M. Social Club, Longfield Road, Darlington is used

as the Polling Place to serve Polling District HHC), and therefore use of the School could potentially mean closing another school to enable the Poll to take place.

37. There are no public transport links to St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall via the most direct route of Thompson Street West, however buses do run the length of Longfield Road, and subsequently down North Road, or along Whessoe Road and Westmoreland Street, and subsequently up North Road, which would provide electors with adequate access the Polling Place via public transport.
38. In view of the above the recommendation is therefore to continue to use St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall to serve as the Polling Place in Polling District NRA.

Representation 3 – St. Teresa’s R. C. Primary School

39. The final representation received during the initial consultation phase was from the Deputy Head Teacher of St. Teresa’s R. C. Primary School, who expressed concern that the School closed due to being used as a Polling Place.
40. In light of the representation received, Officers visited Geneva Road Evangelical Baptist Church Hall, with a view to using the venue as a Polling Place. The building complied with all the requirements of a Polling Place outlined within Electoral Commission guidance, and is situated within the Polling District, and it was therefore decided that Geneva Road Evangelical Baptist Church Hall be proposed as the Polling Place for Polling District EAA in the next round of consultation.

Draft Recommendations

41. Draft recommendations were then published on the Council’s website on 22 October 2018 for further consultation (**Appendix D**), together with the observations of the Returning Officer and the situation of Polling Stations within Polling Places (**Appendix E**), and a link to the relevant webpages was once again circulated to interested parties, and those who had previously made representations.
42. The Returning Officer for the Sedgefield Parliamentary Constituency advised that he was not aware of any issues in relation to the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations in that part of the Sedgefield Parliamentary Constituency administered by this local authority, and offered no comments in terms of our review.

Further Representations Received

43. One further representation was received from an elector by the closing date of the second period of consultation of 4 November 2018 (**Appendix F**).

Representation 4 – St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall (St. George’s Bridge Centre)

44. A representation was received from a resident of the Ridgeway, who proposed that St. George’s Bridge Centre on the corner of Elmtree Street and Whessoe Road be used as a Polling Place to serve Polling District NRA, as opposed to St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall.
45. An external inspection of the premises revealed adequate car parking and what appeared to be suitable external lighting, however a representative from the St. George’s Bridge Centre subsequently informed Officers that the premises were in use every Thursday, and that the Returning Officer would therefore be unable to use the premises on Polling Days.

Parliamentary Boundary Review 2018

46. In anticipation of the final recommendations contained within the Parliamentary Boundary Review, which proposes that the Darlington Parliamentary Constituency Boundary become coterminous with the Darlington Borough Boundary, and was presented to Parliament on 5 September 2018, our proposals allow for the combination of Polling Districts BFA (Darlington) and BFA (Sedgefield) into one Polling District (BFA), whose electors would vote at one Polling Station at West Park Academy.
47. The Parliamentary Boundary Review 2018 also provisionally proposes that Polling District PEE be brought back into the Constituency, which in turn allows for Polling Districts PED and PEE to be brought back within the same Polling Place at The Coleridge Centre, and thus dispense with the use of Skerne Park Youth and Community Centre.
48. These changes will only be enacted if the recommendations of the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2018 are accepted by Government.

Additional Changes (Polling Stations)

49. Our proposal also addresses concerns raised by accredited observers following the Parliamentary (General) Election in 2017, which suggested that the rooms used at Whinfield Primary School and the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College were too congested to accommodate two Polling Stations.
50. In terms of Whinfield Primary School, objections regarding the use of the School were previously received due to the fact the School closed. Prior to the last review, much work was undertaken with the School to ensure that it remained operational during Polling Day, with the classroom housing the Polling Station now having a separate external access allowing it to be isolated from the remainder of the school on Polling Day. Discussions have taken place with representatives at Whinfield Primary School, who have agreed to provide a second classroom, which can also be isolated from the School. This will permit

one Polling Station in each classroom, whilst keeping the remainder of the School open.

51. Likewise, discussions have taken place with staff at the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, and it has agreed to provide a second classroom, adjoining the classroom which is currently used, and can also be isolated from the remainder of the College. Again, this will allow one Polling Station in each classroom, whilst keeping the rest of the College open.