

COUNCIL
25 JANUARY 2024

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS, POLLING PLACES AND POLLING STATIONS 2023

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Mandy Porter, Resources Portfolio**

**Responsible Director -
Elizabeth Davison, Group Director of Operations**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To give consideration to the outcome of the recent review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations, ahead of the Police and Crime Commissioner Election and the Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral Election on 2 May 2024, and prior to the UK Parliamentary (General) Election, which must take place prior to January 2025.

Summary

2. The Representation of the People Act 1983 requires that local authorities conduct reviews of the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations within their local authority area. The next compulsory review was due to commence within a sixteen-month period beginning on 1 October 2023, and at the July 2023 Council meeting a timetable for the next compulsory review was agreed.
3. At the Ordinary Meeting of the Council in July 2023, a timetable for the next compulsory Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations was agreed.
4. This report sets out the process of that review and recommends a small number of changes to the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations that have been previously used in past elections.

Recommendation

5. Council are requested to:-
 - (a) Note the consultation responses received;
 - (b) Approve the changes proposed to the existing Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations ahead of the Police and Crime Commissioner Election and the Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral Election on 2 May 2024, and prior to the UK

Parliamentary (General) Election, which must take place prior to January 2025, as follows:

- (i) That the Polling Districts within the Brinkburn and Faverdale Ward, be renamed BFA, BFB, BFC and BFD (as opposed to BFA(S), BFA(D), BFB and BFC respectively).
 - (ii) That the name of the Polling Place at The Rydal Academy, used in Polling Districts BLB and BLC, reflected the use of the Community Hub in the title.
 - (iii) That St. Mary's Church, Piercebridge remain listed as the Polling Place for Polling District HCG, however that the Polling Station be sited at an alternative Polling Place until the works to upgrade the Church to ensure that it is fit for purpose are completed.
 - (iv) That an amendment to the North Western boundary between Polling District HUA and HUB be made. The North Western boundary currently follows Snipe Lane, to the right of Blackwell Moor Farm and Snipe Meadows, up to the A66. The amendment would move the boundary further west to follow the railway line, which would result in Blackwell Moor Farm, Snipe Meadows and a few other properties, together with the development comprising of Gill Beck Lane, Ash Brook Lane, Elder Brook Avenue and Buckthorn Court, moving from Polling District HUA to Polling District HUB. This would have no impact on the number of voters across the Ward, however would mean a change in Polling Station for a small number of voters. The amendment can be viewed at [Hurworth Ward and Polling Districts \(darlington.gov.uk\)](https://www.darlington.gov.uk/hurworth-ward-and-polling-districts).
 - (v) That the use of the Skerne Park Youth and Community Centre as a Polling Place in Polling District PEE be discontinued, and that the electors resident in Polling District PEE vote in the Polling Place at The Coleridge Centre, Coleridge Gardens, Darlington.
 - (vi) That the electors from Polling Districts SME, SMG and SMH now vote at Sadberge Village Hall, Sadberge, as opposed to St. Anne's Church Hall on Welbeck Avenue, Darlington.
- (c) Authorise the publication of the proposals for Polling Places, as set out in **(Appendix D)**.

Reasons

- (a) To ensure that polling places and polling stations are accessible to voters and have reasonable facilities for voting.

- (b) To comply with the requirements of the Representation of the People Act 1983, the Equality Act 2010 and the Elections Act 2022.
- (c) To enable the decisions to be made, publicised and implemented in good time for the elections scheduled for May 2024.

Elizabeth Davison
Group Director of Operations

Background Papers:

Council Report, of 20 July 2023, entitled 'Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2023'.

Lynne Wood: Extension 5803

S17 Crime and Disorder	The report has no direct impact on crime and disorder.
Health and Wellbeing	There are no issues relating to health and wellbeing which this report needs to address.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	There are no issues relating to carbon impact and climate change.
Diversity	All polling places are assessed to ensure that they are accessible for voters who have a disability.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected, but in particular the wards where polling places or stations change (as set out in the recommendations).
Groups Affected	The proposals affect Darlington voters.
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	The is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This not an executive decision.
Council Plan	There report has no links to the Council Plan.
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

Timetable of the Review

7. The Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA 1983), as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, requires that local authorities conduct reviews of the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations within their local authority area.

8. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 subsequently governs the timing of compulsory Polling District, Polling Place and Polling Station Reviews, with the next compulsory review due to commence within the sixteen-month period beginning on 1 October 2023.
9. At the Ordinary Meeting of the Council in July 2023, a timetable for the next compulsory Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations was agreed.
10. A Notice advising of the formal start of the review was placed on the Council's website on Monday, 2 October 2023. All Members of the Council, local political groups, the Members of Parliament (MPs) for the constituencies of Darlington and Sedgefield, Darlington Association on Disability, and a number of Parish Councils and community groups were also advised that a review was taking place, and that representations could be made accordingly.
11. Those minded to submit representations which objected to the current Polling Places 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.
12. Representations were invited in writing and via e-mail, with information placed on the Council's website (<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/elections/polling-districts-places-and-stations-review/>) and social media profiles.
13. The initial consultation period ran from Monday 2 October 2023 to Sunday 12 November 2023, and encouraged respondents to comment on our existing Polling Districts and Polling Places (**Appendix A**), or make suggestions as to alternative provision.
14. The initial proposals did not recommend any changes to Polling Districts, as it was considered that 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.
15. Between 13 November and 24 November 2023, draft recommendations were formulated taking into consideration the representations received, any suggested alternative places submitted, premises inspections, the provisions within the Elections Act 2022, the draft recommendations of the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023 and the comments of the Returning Officer.
16. A further period of consultation on those draft recommendations then took place between 27 November 2023 and Sunday, 7 January 2024.

Representations received during the initial consultation stage

17. During the initial consultation stage, representations were received from one Presiding Officer, a representative of one of our Polling Places, a representative of another venue

offering their services, Hurworth Parish Council and seven Members of the Public. The representations are reflected in **Appendix B**, together with the comments of Officers, and are summarised below.

18. The representation received from the Presiding Officer related to the use of Harrowgate Hill Working Men's Club and affirmed that the building remained a suitable venue for use as a Polling Place, in the view of that Presiding Officer.
19. The representation from a representative of the Walworth Castle Hotel reaffirmed their commitment to allowing the building to be used as a Polling Place.
20. A representation was received from the Chair of Darlington Mowden Park RFC offering the use of the Darlington Arena as a venue for a Polling Place. Darlington Arena is situated in the Eastbourne Ward, and more specifically within Polling District EAC, which is currently served by a Polling Place at Pilmoor Green Community Centre. The existing Polling Place is much more central to the residential area for Polling District EAC, than the Darlington Arena, and Pilmoor Green Community Centre offers a greater security of tenure for unscheduled elections.
21. The representations from Hurworth Parish Council and the seven Members of the Public centred on the use of Hurworth Primary School as a Polling Place, with the suggestion made that the Council use The Grange Community Centre as an alternative Polling Place.
22. Officers visited The Grange Community Centre during the interim review of Polling District, Polling Places and Polling Stations in 2022, and we were satisfied that the venue in itself would be suitable as a Polling Place. However, concern was expressed at that time as The Grange Community Centre sits on the very western boundary of Polling District HUB. One of the criteria outlined by the Electoral Commission when considering the siting of Polling Places is that the location should provide the greatest convenience to local residents. Hurworth Primary School is sited central to the Polling District, sitting in the heart of one of the main housing estates. The position of Hurworth Primary School within the Polling District makes it very convenient for residents to attend, either on foot or by car, and cast their vote. Officers also remained conscious of the new housing developments on Roundhill Road and at Elderbrook, and again, Hurworth Primary School provides a much more convenient Polling Place for these residents than The Grange Community Centre.
23. Concerns were expressed by residents that the school closes on a Polling Day. In terms of the decision to close, this is one for the Head Teacher and should be based on whether the school can safely operate whilst being used as a Polling Place. If a school chooses to close, the Department for Education offer schools advice on how this can be made up. In terms of scheduled elections, Hurworth Primary School use one of their allocated INSET days to allow teaching staff to attend for training or to complete administrative tasks.

Draft Recommendations

24. Taking these representations and views into consideration, and giving consideration to the provisions within the Elections Act 2022 and the draft recommendations of the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023, we reviewed our findings between Monday 13 November 2023 and Friday 24 November 2023, and revised our draft recommendations, as set out in **Appendix C**.
25. Our draft recommendations proposed the following changes:
 - (a) The renaming of the Polling Districts within the Brinkburn and Faverdale Ward, changing the names from BFA(S), BFA(D), BFB and BFC to BFA, BFB, BFC and BFD, to reflect the fact that this Ward would no longer partly sit in the Sedgefield Parliamentary Constituency. We were, unfortunately, unable to recommend the combination of the split Polling District BFA(S) and BFA(D), as BFA(S) remains 'parished' and must remain a Polling District in its own right.
 - (b) That the name of the Polling Place at The Rydal Academy, used in Polling Districts BLB and BLC, reflected the use of the Community Hub in the title.
 - (c) The discontinued use of St. Mary's Church in Piercebridge as a Polling Place in Polling District HCG, with those electors registered to vote in Polling District HCG moved to St. Edwin's Church, The Green, High Coniscliffe, alongside the electors from Polling Districts HCH and HCI. It is Officers view that St. Mary's Church is currently no longer fit for purpose as a Polling Place. The building lacks heating and toilet facilities, with a portaloos sited outside the Church for staff on Polling Days. There are also issues with the lighting and electrics within the Church, and concerns about disabled access.
 - (d) A small amendment to the Northern boundary between Polling District HUA and HUB – the Northern boundary currently follows Snipe Lane, to the right of Blackwell Moor Farm and Snipe Meadows, up to the A66. Our proposal is to move the boundary further west to follow the railway line, which would result in Blackwell Moor Farm, Snipe Meadows and a few other properties, together with the development comprising of Gill Beck Lane, Ash Brook Lane, Elder Brook Avenue and Buckthorn Court, moving from Polling District HUA to Polling District HUB. This would have no impact on the number of voters across the Ward, however would mean a change in Polling Station for a small number of voters. The amendment can be viewed at [Hurworth Ward and Polling Districts \(darlington.gov.uk\)](https://www.darlington.gov.uk/hurworth-ward-and-polling-districts)
 - (e) The discontinued use of the Skerne Park Youth and Community Centre as a Polling Place in Polling District PEE. Polling District PEE exists as it currently sits in the Sedgefield Parliamentary Constituency. However, once the recommendations of the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023 are enacted it will become part of the Darlington County Constituency, and therefore there will be no reason to separate the electors in Polling District PED and Polling District PEE, so our proposal is that both sets of electors vote at The Coleridge Centre, Coleridge Gardens, Darlington.

- (f) That the electors from Polling Districts SME, SMG and SMH now vote at Sadberge Village Hall, Sadberge, as opposed to St. Anne's Church Hall on Welbeck Avenue, Darlington. Electors living in the Sadberge and Middleton St. George Ward will no longer vote in the Darlington Constituency following the enactment of the recommendations in the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023, but will instead vote in the Stockton West County Constituency. Keeping the electors of Polling Districts SME, SMG and SMH at St. Anne's Church Hall would risk the cross-pollination of Ballot Papers with those electors from Polling District HSC, who also vote at the venue. Separating the voters accordingly eliminates that risk.
26. Whilst the Returning Officer appreciated the depth of concern expressed by those who submitted representations in relation to the use of Hurworth Primary School, and the suggested use of The Grange Community Centre, the school continues to provide a much more convenient location for the vast majority of the residents in Polling District HUB. It is felt that it may disenfranchise the electors of Polling District HUB, as the existing Polling Station at Hurworth Primary School is central to the main residential area within the Polling District. It should also be noted that the school themselves have not objected to being used as a Polling Place.
27. In terms of the use of schools, 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.'*
28. 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.
29. 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."*

30. Our rationale for the proposed changes was communicated to the relevant Ward Councillors, and our draft recommendations were published on the Council's website on Monday 27 November 2023, for further consultation, together with the observations of the Returning Officer and the situation of Polling Stations within Polling Places, and a link to the relevant webpages was once again circulated to interested parties.

Further Representations Received

31. As part of the second phase of consultation the following representations were received:

St. Mary's Church, Piercebridge

32. Concerns were raised by the Parish Council via the Ward Councillor as to the loss of the Polling Place in Polling District HCG, and Officers were advised that works were planned to install a toilet, kitchen, heating, upgrade the electrics and improve external lighting. Officers were initially informed that work would be started early in the New Year (2024), with a completion date of Easter 2024. It is anticipated that this upgrade would ensure that the building was fit for purpose and allow the Church to continue to be used as a Polling Place.
33. Unfortunately, following the meeting of Piercebridge Parish Council on Monday 8 January 2024, and a St. Mary's Refurbishment Project meeting, it has been confirmed that the upgrade to the Church will not be made until Autumn 2024.
34. Officers propose that St. Mary's Church, Piercebridge remain listed as the Polling Place for Polling District HCG, however that the Polling Station be sited at an alternative Polling Place until the works to upgrade the Church are completed.

Havelock Centre, Katherine Street, Darlington

35. On 4 January 2024, a suggestion to the use of the Havelock Centre, Katherine Street, Darlington was submitted by the Ward Councillor to alleviate an issue in Polling District NRD. Officers were informed that residents living on the southern side of the Polling District were experiencing difficulties voting at Northwood Primary School as the school closed a side gate during the day resulting in residents having to walk up to North Road, along to St. Paul's Terrace and then down to the school.
36. The Havelock Centre was visited on Monday 8 January 2024, and it was concluded that the venue would be a suitable Polling Place. The Scheme Manager provided assurance that the premises fulfil the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, in terms of disabled accessibility, and building certainly has sufficient space to accommodate the additional duties contained within the Elections Act 2022. For comparison, the existing Polling Place at Northwood Primary School also complies with the Equality Act 2010, and would have sufficient space to accommodate the additional duties imposed by the Elections Act 2022.

37. In addition to Polling District NRD, Northwood Primary School does also serve Polling District NRC, and in Officers view, is therefore a more attractive option as a Polling Place. It should be noted that Northwood Primary School also remains open and operational during Polling Days. Officers are willing to liaise with the school to ascertain whether the aforementioned gate can remain open on Polling Days to improve residents' access arrangements.

Salutation Hall, Salutation Road, Darlington

38. It was drawn to Officers' attention on 10 January 2024 that Salutation Hall, Salutation Road, Darlington required some repairs and may be subject to a possible sale. The Booking Agent for the Hall was contacted, and has been assured that, although the building is starting to show its age, and that work is ongoing to look at what is needed to maintain the Hall, the Hall remains available for hire for the foreseeable future.

Haughton Children's Centre, Salters Lane South, Darlington

39. A report was taken to Cabinet on Tuesday 9 January 2024, which proposed changes to the operational arrangements to Haughton Children's Centre. The work is not planned to start until after exams have taken place in Summer 2024, so the premises will be available for the forthcoming Police and Crime Commissioner Election and Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral Election on 2 May 2024. The work is planned for eight weeks, and so the venue should be available once again after the school holidays.

Other Representations Received

40. The Clerk of Bishopton Parish Council advised that the Parish Council had no comments to make on the proposals.

Legislation

41. The Equality Act 2010 prohibits local authorities from doing anything that constitutes unlawful discrimination, including over the provision of services when exercising public functions and requires reasonable adjustments to enable disabled people to be able to vote.
42. The Elections Act 2022 includes voter ID requirements for people who vote in person. Suitable arrangements will need to be available at polling places to allow people who choose to wear a face covering to have their identity checked in a way that respects privacy, religious or cultural beliefs.