

POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES REVIEW 2023

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to seek a recommendation from Council for approval of plans for a statutory review of polling districts and polling places within the Borough of Woking.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That:

- (i) the compulsory polling district and places review commences on Monday, 2 October 2023;
- (ii) the outline timetable for the review be approved; and
- (iii) approval be granted to follow the review process described in the report.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendations set out above.

Background Papers: None.

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Polling Districts and Polling Places Review

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, the Council has a duty to divide its area into polling districts and to designate a polling place for each district.
 - Polling districts are geographical electoral areas into which wards and constituencies may be sub-divided.
 - Polling places are the building or areas designated by the Council where electors in a polling district go to cast their vote in person.
 - Polling stations are the number of issuing desks in the building or area that is the designated polling place.
- 1.2 The Electoral Administration Act 2006, as amended, introduced a duty on all local authorities in Great Britain to review their polling districts and polling places at least once every five years.
- 1.3 Under Section 18C of the Representation of the People Act 1983, the next compulsory review must be undertaken within a 16 month period between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025.
- 1.4 The intention of the legislation was reviews would be completed by the January before a UK parliamentary general election. However, since the repeal of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011, there is no longer any certainty as to when the next general election will be.
- 1.5 The Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022 means:
 - the UK Parliament can be dissolved by the King on request of the Prime Minister, at any time within the 5 years of the life of the Parliament
 - the next general election must take place before Tuesday 28 January 2025, but it could happen at any point before then
 - there is no longer a link between the timing of the compulsory polling district and places review falling in a 16 month period ending 3 months before a scheduled general election.
- 1.6 In addition, the Boundary Commission for England is currently undertaking a review of parliamentary constituency boundaries. The Commission has now published its final recommendations, and Orders for the new parliamentary constituency boundaries will be made by 1 November 2023.
- 1.7 Once the Orders for new parliamentary constituencies have been made, the new boundaries will be used for the next general election.
- 1.8 If a parliamentary by election is called in the meantime, it would be run on existing boundaries.
- 1.9 These issues mean it is important that the polling district and places review is carried out as early as possible, so that Woking Borough Council has agreed polling districts and places to be used for the next parliamentary election as well as the scheduled local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May 2024 and has a polling scheme in place which reflects the new constituencies.

2.0 Timing of the Polling District and Places Review

- 2.1 It is important to complete the review as soon as possible, so the polling districts and places for future elections can be agreed in time for the next general election and scheduled local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

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2.2 Section 18C of the Representation of the People Act 1983 does not allow the review to commence before 1 October 2023. It is therefore recommended that the compulsory polling district and places review commences on Monday, 2 October 2023.

3.0 Review Timetable

3.1 Although the review itself cannot commence until 1 October 2023, there is a degree of preparatory work which can be undertaken prior to the review, as well as informal preliminary consultation.

3.2 It would be desirable for any changes in polling districts to be reflected in the electoral register published on 1 December 2023. This therefore requires a compact timetable.

3.3 The proposed timetable for the review is as follows:

Review of Polling Districts and Places 2023	
Preparatory work	Commenced 7 August 2023
Resolution from Council providing for commencement of review	22 August 2023
Preliminary review – including informal consultation	August to 1 October 2023
Notice of review published	Monday 2 October 2023
Council proposals published	Monday 2 October 2023
Commencement of formal consultation	Monday 2 October 2023
End of formal consultation	Monday 6 November 2023
Consider responses	7 - 21 November 2023
Final proposals published via Council agenda papers and Council website	Wednesday 22 November 2023
Council Meeting	Thursday 30 November 2023
Conclude review	Thursday 30 November 2023
Publish electoral register (including any new or amended polling districts)	1 December 2023
Scheduled elections on new polling districts, places and stations scheme	Thursday 2 May 2024

4.0 Review Process

4.1 The process for a polling district and places review is set out in Schedule A1, Representation of the People Act 1983.

4.2 The Council must:

- publish a notice of the holding of a review;

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- consult the (Acting) Returning Officer ((A)RO) for every parliamentary constituency which is wholly or partly in its area;
- publish all representations made by an (A)RO within 30 days of receipt by posting a copy of them at the local authority's office and in at least one conspicuous place in their area and, if the authority maintains a website, by placing a copy on the authority's website; and
- seek representations from such persons as it thinks have particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability. Such persons must have an opportunity to make representations and to comment on the representations made by the (A)RO(s).

4.3 On completion of the review, the Council must give reasons for its decisions and publish:

- all correspondence sent to an (A)RO in connection with the review;
- all correspondence sent to any person whom the authority thinks has particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability;
- all representations made by any person in connection with the review;
- the minutes of any meeting held by the council to consider any revision to the designation of polling districts or polling places within its area as a result of the review;
- details of the designation of polling districts and polling places within the local authority area as a result of the review; and
- details of the places where the results of the review have been published.

5.0 Preparatory Work

5.1 Although the formal review cannot commence until 2 October 2023, there is a range of preparatory activity which the Electoral Services Team is already carrying out. This includes:

- Analysing the final proposals published by the Boundary Commission on 1 July 2023 and understanding the impact for the area of Woking.
- Liaising with eXpress, the Council's electoral software supplier, about structuring the electoral register to accommodate boundary changes.
- Preparing data for the start of the review (electorate figures, turnout from previous elections, information about new housing developments in the next 5 years).
- Liaising with the Council's GIS Officer to obtain detailed up to date maps to enable accurate designation of polling district boundaries.
- Identifying organisations with a special interest/expertise in disabled access to consult.

6.0 Preliminary Review

6.1 Electoral Services and other relevant Council Officers are also carrying out a preliminary review of the current polling districts and places in the Borough to assess their suitability. This involves:

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- Compiling details of current polling places with a summary of their suitability.
- Checking the continued availability of polling places.
- Reviewing feedback from stakeholders at previous elections.
- Identifying potential alternative buildings where appropriate.
- Ensuring that polling places can support the requirements of the Elections Act, for example with sufficient space to undertake Voter ID checks, and to accommodate equipment to assist disabled voter.
- Seeking advice and guidance from local disability groups and local authority experts around accessibility.
- Preparing council proposals and drafting (A)RO comments, including explanations for “no changes”.

7.0 Informal Consultation

7.1 The Elections Team is also planning to carry out informal consultation with interested groups in preparation for the review. This involves:

- seeking the views of organisations with a special interest/expertise in disabled access;
- informal consultation with group leaders/local political parties;
- getting advice from relevant Council Officers (for example Planning, Property Services, and the Equalities Officer); and
- inviting comments from Deputy Returning Officers and Presiding Officers.

7.2 It will be important to do as much preparatory work as possible before the official commencement of the review.

8.0 Corporate Strategy

8.1 The Woking for All strategy commits the local authority to a set of strategic objectives between 2022 and 2027 that give clear direction to residents, businesses, partner organisations and council staff, based around four community-based themes. These objectives include:

- Healthier communities;
- Engaged communities;
- Greener communities; and
- Prospering communities

8.2 The review of polling districts and places will seek to ensure that residents are provided with the opportunity to engage with the Council, and are provided with all the details necessary to ensure that they remain fully informed. Feedback received will be used to ensure that the review provides the best possible outcomes for the residents.

9.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

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- 9.1 The review will be undertaken by Officers and any financial costs will be kept to a minimum. Whilst it is not anticipated that it will be necessary, any requests for funding over £500 will first need to be agreed by the Council's Financial Control Panel.
- 9.2 The proposals will ensure that the Council's polling districts and places have been reviewed in time for the next general election, the scheduled local elections and the Police and Crime Commissioner elections. No significant risks have been identified, noting that the review will ensure all of the Borough's polling stations are fully accessible and local to the residents they serve.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 9.3 Over the past year, the Elections Teams has worked hard to ensure that no electors, regardless of disability, face barriers to casting their vote at a polling station. As such the Officers have worked closely with the Woking Access Group to introduce positive changes to the layout of polling stations, the facilities provided and the information available at both the Polling Stations and on the Council's website. As part of this review, Officers will again engage with the Access Group, and other bodies to identify any improvements that can be made to accessibility.
- 9.4 The work will be undertaken by the Elections Team, though support will be sought from several Teams including Marketing and Communications, Property Services and the Council's Equalities Officer.

Legal

- 9.5 The Council is legally obliged to undertake a 5 yearly review of polling districts and polling places pursuant to the Electoral Administration Act 2006. Undertaking the review in accordance with the timetable set out in this report will ensure that the Council is compliant with these obligations.

10.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 10.1 Section 7.0 of this report outlines the approach to be adopted by the Council in consulting residents, and other stakeholders as part of the review of the current polling districts and places. All responses received will be published as part of the final report.

REPORT ENDS