

Meeting: General Purposes Committee
Date: 27 November 2023
Classification: Part 1
Key Decision: N/A
Title of Report: **Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places/Polling Stations**

Executive Director: Claire Shuter (Executive Director of Strategy and Change)
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Executive Councillor: Councillor Moyies (Cabinet Member for Public Health, Adult Social Care and Constitutional Affairs)

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Representation of the People Act 1983 ('1983 Act') places a duty on the Council to divide the City into polling districts and designate polling places for the districts. The Council has a duty to keep these polling arrangements under review.
- 1.2. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced a number of changes to the 1983 Act in respect of the way reviews must be undertaken. Under the 2006 Act, the Council is required to undertake a review of polling districts and polling places/stations within their area on a four yearly cycle. The last general review in Southend was completed on 9th January 2019.
- 1.3. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of the statutory reviews. The next compulsory review has to take place within a 16 month period between 1st October 2023 and 31st January 2025.
- 1.4. This report sets out the results of the consultation regarding the polling districts and polling places that fall within the City and the recommendations of the Returning Officer in respect of the responses received.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. **That that the recommendations of the Returning Officer in Appendix 2 to this report be endorsed and the current polling districts and polling places/stations remain unchanged pending the completion of the ward boundary review.**

3. Background

- 3.1. **A polling district** is a geographical area created by the sub-division of a constituency into smaller parts. For voting purposes, each parliamentary constituency and every local government ward is divided into one or more polling districts. The polling districts for the City elections mirror those for the parliamentary elections.
- 3.2. The review can only address issues within the current ward structure of the City. It cannot make changes to the ward (or City) boundaries. There are some areas where moving a ward boundary might resolve an anomaly concerning the allocation of voters to polling stations, but this cannot be achieved as part of the review.
- 3.3. **A polling place** is an area within a polling district in which a polling station is located. There is no legal definition of a polling place which could be as large as a polling district or as small as a particular building. The Electoral Commission is aware that some authorities designate the entire polling district as the polling place. However, Section 18 of the 1983 Act states that 'the polling place must be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of a district how they will be able to reach the polling station'. The Commission therefore recommends that the polling place should always be defined. It was agreed at the meeting of the General Purposes Committee on 16th November 2011 that a polling place be defined as the building (including the surrounding grounds) within which the voting may take place.
- 3.4. **A polling station** is the room or area within the polling place where voting takes place. Unlike polling districts and polling places which are fixed by the local authority, polling stations are determined by the Returning Officer for the election.
- 3.5. The aims of the review were to seek to ensure that:
- all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.
 - as far as is practicable, every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled.
 - the polling place(s) for a polling district is within the area of the polling district unless special circumstances make it desirable for the polling place to be outside the polling district area (i.e. because suitable alternative buildings are not available in the area).
- 3.6. In an ideal world, the Returning Officer would have the choice of a range of fully accessible buildings, conveniently located for the electors. The Electoral Commission recognises that, in practice, this is not the case and there may actually be little choice available. Where it is necessary to use a polling place where the access is not ideal, the Commission expects the Council to make reasonable adjustments to provide access to all electors.
- 3.7. The Commission also recognises that in reality the choice of polling place will often be the balance between the quality (access, facilities etc) of a

building and the distance between the residents and that building compared to other options for polling places.

- 3.8 The law makes provision for the Returning Officer to use schools (including academies) free of charge for the purposes of an election, subject to covering certain costs including heating, lighting and caretaking charges. Returning Officers do use schools because they are well known venues within the community and can be provided at less cost to the public purse. In the City, the use of the smaller schools are generally avoided where possible as this could result in the closure of a school or part of a school on polling day. However, it must be emphasised that there are areas in the City where there are no suitable alternatives available.
- 3.9 The use of portable buildings as polling stations are also avoided where possible, primarily because of the additional costs to the public purse that arise from the hire, delivery, siting, setting up and equipping of a portable unit. The number of suppliers in this region have reduced, putting pressures on the availability of suitable units. This form of accommodation is less than satisfactory in comparison with most of the buildings used as polling stations and problems are often experienced with the use of portable buildings at election time, such as:
- limited in size and location;
 - difficult to site in certain locations;
 - limited facilities for polling staff;
 - suitability in cold/wet/inclement weather;
 - poor public perception;
 - power supply limitations;
 - prone to vandalism
- 3.10 The Electoral Commission recommends that there should be a minimum of one polling station for every 2,250 electors voting in person. This is lower than the level set out in previous guidance, but has been set to reflect the additional requirements of the polling station process, both for polling station staff and electors as a result of changes made by the Elections Act 2022, particularly in relation to voter ID. Generally, where elector numbers are of concern and exceed the recommended threshold, the best solution is the addition of a further polling station within the same polling place. In the case of the last election, 17 out of the 66 buildings used were double polling stations.

The Review Process

- 3.11 In undertaking the review, local authorities are required to:
- Publish a notice of holding a review.
 - Seek representations from such persons that it thinks have particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons with any type of disability.
 - Consider the proposals of the Returning Officer.

- On completion of the review, complete and adopt revised arrangements, which must be published.
- 3.12 The formal consultation on existing polling districts and polling places/stations (Appendix 1) commenced on 2nd October 2023 upon the publication of a notice seeking comments by 30th October. Details of the review were publicised through the Council’s website (via the “Your Say Southend” consultation portal) and a public notice in the local the press and comments were sought from the local Members of Parliament, Southend Councillors and a number of other individuals/organisations.
- 3.13 Only two representations were received in response to the consultation exercise. A copy of the Returning Officer’s responses to these suggestions are attached at [Appendix 2](#) to this report. A map and photographs (taken from Google Street view) showing the suggested changes is attached at [Appendix 3](#) to this report. These are in relation to the location of the portable polling station for polling district WHZ within Chalkwell Ward and the relocation of the polling place/station for polling district WV within Blenheim Park Ward.
- 3.14 Councillors are asked to be mindful that over the years, much work has been undertaken to ensure that the polling arrangements are convenient to electors across the City. There have been a number of improvements made to polling districts and places/stations following the previous reviews in 2014 and 2019. Any amendments recommended following these reviews have been implemented. After each election, observations received from the Returning Officer, polling station inspectors and presiding officers are considered and used to implement any necessary changes. This feedback has helped to highlight premises where additional measures are required from the simple provision of more direction signage to the installation of ramps, or even a change in a polling place. An access survey was undertaken in respect of all of the buildings used as polling stations as part of the last review and prior to the last election. The findings have resulted in some accessibility improvements to a number of the buildings.
- 3.15 In January 2024, the Council will begin the ward boundary review as required by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. As a consequence of the review, the Council will need to carry out a full review of the polling districts and the location of polling places/stations to serve each polling district. This exercise will commence following the publication of the Commission’s final recommendations in July 2025. In the light of this the Commission has recommended that a light touch approach be taken in respect of the current polling review.

4. Other Options

- 4.1. A number of alternative premises have been considered for use as polling stations and recommendations made accordingly where it is felt that an alternative would provide better voting arrangements or the premises concerned would improve accessibility.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. There is no separate budget provision for the costs of carrying out the review. These have been met from existing budgets.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1. These are addressed in paragraphs 1.1 to 1.3 of the report.

7. Policy Context

- 8.1 This supports the Council's Vision in becoming an excellent and high performing organisation.

8. Carbon Impact

- 8.1. The location of polling stations closer to residential properties can help to reduce car journeys.

9. Equalities

- 9.1. Local authorities have a duty to review the accessibility of all polling places to disabled voters and ensure that every polling place, and prospective polling place, for which it is responsible is accessible to disabled voters 'so far as is reasonable and practicable'.

- 9.2. In preparation for the City Council elections in 2023, all the polling stations were assessed against an accessibility checklist provided by the Electoral Commission and a risk assessment was undertaken. As a result of this exercise a number of accessibility adjustments were made to the polling stations.

- 9.3 All polling staff receive equalities training as part of the mandatory staff training for each election.

10. Consultation

- 10.1 This is set out in paragraphs 3.11 to 3.14 of this report.

11. Appendices

Appendix 1: Existing polling districts and polling places/stations

Appendix 2: Report of Returning Officer in respect of suggestions

Appendix 3: Plans of polling districts and photographs of suggested locations

Report Authorisation:

This report has been approved for publication by:		
	Name:	Date:
S151 Officer	Joe Chesterton	14 November 2023
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Executive Director(s)	Claire Shuter	14 November 2023
Relevant Cabinet Member(s)	Cllr Moyies	17 th November 2023