

TITLE OF REPORT: 2019 Statutory Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

REPORT OF: Mike Barker, Strategic Director, Corporate Services & Governance

Purpose of the Report

1. Cabinet is asked to consider the outcome of the statutory review of polling districts and polling places, and to recommend Council to agree a reduction to the number of polling districts as well changes to existing district boundaries and the location of polling places.

Background

2. Polling districts and polling places were last reviewed in 2014 under Section 17 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 ('the Act').
3. Under the Act, the current review was required to be undertaken within 16 months beginning 1 October 2018. A five-yearly programme of review is set out, under which the next review must be undertaken during the 16-month period beginning 1 October 2023. The Act also allows for reactive changes on an *ad hoc* basis within this period.

Proposal

4. These proposals put forward plans to reduce the overall provision of polling districts from 103 to 102 and to make minor changes to boundaries and polling places. A full summary of the proposed changes under this review is set out in the attached schedules (Appendices 2 and 3).

Recommendations

5. Cabinet is asked to recommend Council to approve the following:
 - (i) That the proposals for changes to polling district boundaries and the situation of polling places be adopted in full.
 - (ii) That these changes come into force on 31 January 2020 to coincide with the publication of the 2020 revised register of electors for Gateshead.

For the following reasons:

- (i) To comply with the requirements of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 and the Electoral Registration Act 2013.
- (ii) To ensure that the electors of the Borough are afforded reasonable and practicable facilities for voting.
- (iii) To ensure that, so far as is practicable and reasonable, polling places are accessible to all electors, including those who are disabled.

Policy Context

1. These proposals reflect national policy through adherence to the legislative framework and Electoral Commission guidance on the conduct of reviews. The Council's constitutional commitments are also underpinned by the successful implementation of these proposals.

Background

2. Local authorities have a duty under Section 18 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 to keep polling district boundaries and designated polling places under review to best serve local circumstances. Within each of these districts an area or building must be designated to accommodate a polling station at elections.
3. The amended statutory schedule by which reviews of polling arrangements must be conducted required the next such review to take place not more than 16 months after 1 October 2018. Subsequent reviews must take place not later than 16 months after 1 October every five years thereafter.
4. The statutory purpose of the exercise is to review the designation of polling districts and polling places to ensure that polling arrangements and facilities remain best suited to meet the needs of the electorate. Beyond the stipulation that each Parliamentary constituency must be divided into polling districts, and in each of these districts a polling place designated, there is no prescription of these arrangements, save that the authority must ensure:

“...such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances and, in particular, they shall, so far as is reasonable and practicable, designate as polling places only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled”

Section 18C (1) of the RPA 1983 as amended

5. The statutory framework within which reviews must be delivered allows for a complementary local approach to be applied. The local approach taken under this review can be summarised as follows:
 - Electoral balance – ensuring electorate size justifies polling provision whilst not over-burdening facilities.
 - Resources – ensuring provision is practicable and financially sustainable.
 - Centrally located polling places – ensuring, where possible, that facilities are able to serve a full 360° radius of residential properties.
6. The proposals have been developed following:
 - Initial analysis of existing arrangements, looking at allocated electorates, level of use and cost.
 - Inspection of all existing polling places by polling station inspectors at the 2019 local election.
 - Inspection of all proposed polling places to ensure their suitability.

- Representation by the (Acting) Returning Officer for all Parliamentary constituencies falling wholly within Gateshead Council's administrative boundaries.
 - Internal consultation with all Councillors regarding initial proposals.
 - Publication of revised initial proposals for full stakeholder consultation – online consultation portal hosted on the Council website, hardcopy documents placed on deposit across the borough.
 - Analysis of consultation responses and further revision of proposals where necessary
7. Overall, the number of changes proposed is relatively low. The total number of polling districts, and therefore polling places, is proposed to reduce by 1, from 103 to 102. This is the removal of district NEG which was created exclusively for the student population at Trinity Square accommodation but has seen very low voting figures primarily due to the time of year most elections are held. There are minor boundary changes in 14 wards and there are up to 10 other cases where it is proposed to change the location of a polling station (refer to Appendices 2 and 3 for a summary of changes).

Consultation

8. As set out under paragraph 6 above, this review has met its statutory requirements for stakeholder consultation and has endeavoured in particular to ensure that Gateshead's Councillors have been afforded every opportunity to influence the review process and its final proposals for change.

Alternative Options

9. The Council has fulfilled a statutory duty to conduct this review and in doing so pursued the only course available. The local approach to this review was given broad support amongst Councillors. Having been subject to full stakeholder consultation, the proposals here are considered to be broadly supported by stakeholders; therefore, no alternative options are presented.

Implications of Recommended Option

10. Resources:

- a) **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital has confirmed that there are minimal financial implications to these proposals. There are a few changes to polling stations, mostly proposing to use fewer schools but more private establishments, but any new charges imposed are outweighed by savings in others.
- b) **Human Resources Implications** – At a stand-alone poll, the reduction of one polling place will result in the employment of 2 fewer polling station staff.
- c) **Property Implications** – Nil.

11. Risk Management Implication – Nil.

12. Equality and Diversity Implications – The proposed changes to polling places are not considered likely to impact upon turnout at polls, but some individuals with mobility issues may find increased distance to their allocated polling place a barrier to turning out. These changes will be publicised through direct correspondence with the electorate. These activities will focus on facilitating individuals to make use of absent voting arrangements and can reasonably be expected to mitigate the equality and diversity implications of these proposals.

13. Crime and Disorder Implications – Nil.

14. Health Implications – Nil.

15. Sustainability Implications – Nil.

16. Human Rights Implications – Nil.

17. Area and Ward Implications – These proposals have a bearing on the electoral arrangements in all wards across the Borough but are deemed not to have negative implications for any of these areas.

Background Information

18. The following have been relied upon in the preparation of this report:

- Representation from the (Acting) Returning Officer for Blaydon and Gateshead constituencies
- Consultation response from stakeholders