



REPORT OF:	CHIEF EXECUTIVE
TO:	POLICY COUNCIL
DATE OF MEETING:	30th NOVEMBER 2023

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS, POLLING PLACES AND POLLING STATIONS – OCTOBER 2023

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

For the Council to consider and approve the final recommendations following the review and public consultation.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council is asked:

- 1 To note the review of polling districts, polling places and polling stations commenced on 2 October 2023.
- 2 To approve the final recommendations of the review and changes to polling districts, polling places and polling stations for parliamentary and local government elections.
- 3 Subject to 2 above, to note the publication date (1 February 2024) of the revised electoral register and implementation of the review from 2 May 2024 (or earlier in the event of a General Election or a referendum).
- 4 To note the existing delegation to the Chief Executive to make any appropriate changes to the polling districts, polling places and polling stations following approval of the final recommendations whenever such needs arise, until the next formal review.

3. BACKGROUND

The Council undertook a review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations in October 2018, following a boundary review by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) and the subsequent Blackburn with Darwen (Electoral Changes) Order 2017.

In accordance with the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, the Council must regularly review the division of its area into polling districts and the places where electors are asked to vote. Full reviews must be started and completed within the period of 16 months that starts on 1 October of every fifth year after 1 October 2013. The compulsory review period is therefore 16 months between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025, but in view of the volume of anticipated changes and the impact of boundary changes for UK Parliamentary constituencies, the review has been undertaken at the earliest time during the compulsory period.

The review has taken into consideration the recommendations for changes to the UK Parliamentary constituency boundaries ([2023 Review | Boundary Commission for England \(independent.gov.uk\)](https://www.independent.gov.uk)), and the impact of the voter ID requirements introduced by the Elections Act 2022.

The designation of the Council's polling places and districts is the responsibility of the Council and the relevant functions, including the Council's duties under the Representation of the People Act 1983 to divide constituencies into polling districts and the power to divide wards into polling districts at local government elections. Polling districts for local government elections are not automatically part of the statutory review. However, the Electoral Commission advises that the polling districts for UK parliamentary and local government elections should always be the same, and it therefore follows that any review of parliamentary polling arrangements should be conducted simultaneously with one of local government arrangements.

The review of parliamentary polling districts has therefore been combined with that of local polling districts and covered both parliamentary and local government polling arrangements within the administrative boundary of Blackburn with Darwen. This will ensure that polling districts for local elections are the same as for parliamentary elections. The (Acting) Returning Officer for the Rossendale and Darwen constituency was formally notified of the Council's review and proposals and was invited for any representations during the consultation period.

4. THE REVIEW

The formal procedure to be followed by local authorities in undertaking the review is described in Schedule A1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. The Council published a notice of holding a review on 2 October 2023 and consulted parliamentary (Acting) Returning Officer for the Rossendale & Darwen constituency. The Returning Officer's proposals and representations were published on the Council website for public consultation, which took place between 2 October 2023 and 10 November 2023.

During the consultation period representations and comments were invited from any interested parties, including Members, the two Members of Parliament, the Returning Officer for the Rossendale and Darwen constituency, local disability groups and other interested parties. A hard copy of the Returning Officer's proposals and representations was also available for inspection at the Town Hall by contacting the Elections Team (**Appendix 1**).

The review and the recommendations involved considering the feedback received from the recent election held and visiting/accessing a number of existing and proposed polling places and stations in Blackburn and Darwen. In designating polling places/stations the Council ensured that a set criteria was met relating to the location, facilities (including private areas for checking voter IDs), accessibility to and within the polling place/station (including disabled access), health and safety and space. The review also included an evaluation of the 3 temporary polling stations (mobiles) to determine whether the continued use and location provided the best option taking into account, amongst other matters, the feedback the Council had received from residents and electors since the last review. The review also considered the continued use of schools following feedback from school head teachers/managers over the years, and their requests to use alternative venues be used due to disruption and for other reasons on polling day.

Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, Returning Officers have the right to select schools as venues for polling stations, free of charge for the purpose of taking the poll (reasonable and proper costs for extra heating and lighting on polling day can be reimbursed). To minimise disruption or requiring schools to close, where reasonable alternative premises exist nearby that can provide similar or better facilities for voting and are available, they have been considered. In order to encourage feedback from schools, details of the review were included in the regular Schools Bulletin issued by the Schools and Education Department at the start of the consultation

period. Some affected schools were also separately contacted during the consultation period and their feedback is included in the final recommendations (**Appendix 2**).

In drawing up the final recommendations consideration was also given to the number of polling stations allocated for a given electorate. The physical geography of a ward including, for example, railway lines, dual carriageways, the shape of the ward itself was also taken into account. Other factors taken into consideration included the situation of polling places/stations in relation to wider amenities and the main transport routes within a ward. In order to predict the likely number of electors at a polling station in the future, figures from the May 2023 local elections were used. Other information referred to during the review included availability and accessibility of polling places and previous representations made by candidates, agents and polling station staff.

All comments and representations received during the consultation period were considered before the Returning Officer's final recommendations were prepared and, subsequently, these were published on the website on 22 November 2023, including ward maps. The web link of the final recommendations was also sent to all Members, the offices of the two MPs, and the (Acting) Returning Officer for the Rossendale and Darwen constituency.

The Council's approval of the final recommendations will complete the review and the new polling arrangements will be implemented at the next scheduled local government elections on 2 May 2024 (or earlier in the event of a General Election or a referendum).

The implementation of the new polling arrangements will require some changes to the electoral register. The new electoral register will be published on 1 February 2024, following a statutory 14 day notice period.

Finally, acknowledging that there may be circumstances that require changes to polling districts, polling places and/or polling stations before the next formal review, the Council is requested to note the existing delegated authority to the Chief Executive, to make such changes as and when the need to do so arises.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Council must review the parliamentary and local arrangements to ensure that all electors in the borough and constituency have reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances, taking into account the Election Act 2022 changes and the recommendations for changes to the UK Parliamentary constituency boundaries.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Generally, the cost of hiring venues as polling stations forms a considerable part of the election expenses. Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, (Acting) Returning Officers have the right to select schools as venues for polling stations, free of charge for the purpose of taking the poll. But reasonable and proper costs incurred for extra heating and lighting for the part of the building used as a polling station on the day can be reimbursed.

Temporary polling stations (mobiles) are costly to hire, as well as creating other issues in the locality where they are installed. Under the current polling arrangements there are three such temporary polling stations. Following the review and under the final recommendations this will be reduced to two.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Under the Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA 1983), every local authority has the statutory responsibility to divide their area into polling districts, to designate polling places for those polling districts, and to keep the polling districts and polling places under review.

The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced an additional requirement whereby local authorities must review all polling districts and polling places within the period of 16 months starting on 1 October of every fifth year after 1 October 2013. When undertaking a review, steps set out in Schedule A1 to the Representation of the People Act 1983 must be followed.

Local authorities must also comply with specific access requirements (including the requirements under Elections Act 2022 which aims to provide greater flexibility and choice in how disabled voters are supported to vote at polling stations), and in particular they must seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in the local authority area have such reasonable facilities for voting as practicable in the circumstances.

In addition, in order to meet the voter ID requirements under Elections Act 2022, poll stations must have facilities that include privacy areas for ID checks and conversations.

Local authorities cannot change the electoral ward boundaries, or the parliamentary constituency boundaries as part of their review of polling districts and polling places, as they are the responsibility of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and the relevant Boundary Commission, respectively under legislation.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of the review will involve work to update the GIS database, the electoral register and the elections management system. Some support from the software system provider may also be required by the Elections Team.

9. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

Council has a statutory obligation to ensure that polling places are accessible to all electors. The accessibility of buildings and location of polling places is a key factor in developing the final proposals.

10. CONSULTATIONS

Members were invited for general feedback on the current polling stations, and consultations were held with the leadership of the [then] two political groups. Feedback received by the Elections Team during recent elections from Polling Station Inspectors, polling station staff, electors, schools, campaigners and members of the public were also taken into account and informed the proposals.

Notice of the review was published and the public consultation on the Returning Officer's proposals took place between 2 October and 10 November 2023. The two Members of Parliament, the Returning Officer for the Rossendale & Darwen constituency were also notified of the review and invited to make representations on the proposals. In addition, details of the review were included in the School Bulletin to encourage feedback to consultation.

Contact Officer: Asad Laher - Deputy Director, Legal & Governance
(01254 585495)

Date: 21 November 2023
Background Papers: None

Appendix 1: Consultation & Proposals – October 2023
Appendix 2: Final Recommendations