

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND PLACES

Submitted by: Returning Officer/Democratic Services Manager

Portfolio: Communications, Policy and Partnerships

Wards Affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To report on the review of polling districts and polling places that has been carried out.

Recommendations

- (a) That the changes to the Thistleberry polling districts I0001 and I0005, as outlined in the report, be approved.
- (b) That the existing polling districts be confirmed as per the maps provided during the consultation exercise (available in the members room).
- (c) That Council refer the recommendations relating to polling stations to the Returning Officer for consideration.

Reason

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 placed a duty on the Council to carry out a review of all polling districts and places in its area before 31 December 2014.

1. Background

The statutory responsibility for reviewing UK Parliamentary polling districts and places rests within each relevant local authority in Great Britain for so much of any constituency as is situated in its area.

The Council's constitution states that it is the responsibility of Full Council to divide the constituency into polling districts.

A. Polling Districts

A polling district is a geographical area created by the sub-division of a UK Parliamentary constituency for the purposes of a UK Parliamentary election. The Council must keep Polling Districts under review and seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in its area have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.

In England, each parish is to be a separate polling district unless there are special circumstances.

B. Polling Places

A polling place is the building or area in which polling stations will be selected by the (Acting) Returning Officer. A polling place within a polling district must be designated so that polling stations are within easy reach of all electors from across the polling district. The Council's Constitution states that the polling place for all polling districts be defined as the polling district unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly out of the district.

C. Polling Stations

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 chosen by the relevant Returning Officer for the election.

Consultation

- a) The notice of Review was published on 18th August 2014 and questionnaires sent out to the following:
 - All presiding Officers
 - All Premise Managers
 - VAST (information included on the VAST website and sent to 412 email contacts)
 - Neighbouring Local Authorities and Returning Officers
 - The Returning Officer for Newcastle under Lyme
- b) Leaflets and posters were sent out to all elected members, parish councils and LAPS.
- c) Leaflets and posters were distributed to community centres, libraries and contact centres in the Borough.
- d) An email regarding the review was sent out to all Parish Councils and LAPs.
- e) A briefing was given by the Democratic Services Manager at the Parish Council Forum and information distributed including posters and leaflets.
- f) An online consultation form was designed and published on the Council's website and a link sent out to all elected members. Officers from the Council's GIS department also provided up to date maps showing the current polling districts and polling stations which were included on the webpage.

Results of the Consultation

116 questionnaires were returned and 11 responses were submitted through the online web form.

Most of the responses were favourable in relation to the current arrangements. Areas highlighted for further investigation and discussion are detailed below.

The full response to the consultation from the Retuning Officer is attached at Appendix A to this report.

2. Issues

Recommendation to alter Thistleberry Polling Districts (map attached)

A representation from a ward councillor has requested Council to consider an alteration to the current polling district boundaries for the Thistleberry polling districts I0001 and I0005 as there is now a footway and cycle path between the Harriet Higgins Centre and the new estate. As can be seen from the attached map this would appear to be in the best interests of the electors on the new estate.

That the following streets be moved from polling district I0005 to I0001:

Street	Postcode	Properties	Current Station	Proposed Station
Snowgoose Way	ST5 2GA	53	The Bridge Room, Newcastle Golf Club (I0005)	The Harriet Higgins Centre (I0001)
Brent Close	ST5 2GD	19	The Bridge Room, Newcastle Golf Club	The Harriet Higgins Centre
Reedmace Walk	ST5 2GE	22	The Bridge Room, Newcastle Golf Club	The Harriet Higgins Centre
Galingale View	ST5 2GQ ST5 2GR	87	The Bridge Room, Newcastle Golf Club	The Harriet Higgins Centre
Gadwall Croft	ST5 1GL	41	The Bridge Room, Newcastle Golf Club	The Harriet Higgins Centre
Greylag Gate	ST5 2GP	25	The Bridge Room, Newcastle Golf Club	The Harriet Higgins Centre
Barnacle Place	ST5 2GS	16	The Bridge Room, Newcastle Golf Club	The Harriet Higgins Centre
		263		

This will result in an additional 263 properties for the Harriet Higgins Centre.

If it is assumed that on average each property has two eligible electors which equals a total electorate of 1621 for the I0001 polling district which is within the guidelines set by the Electoral Commission.

2.1 Representations from the consultation and recommendations to the Returning Officer relating to polling stations

Most stations have been in use for many years and changes have only been made when absolutely necessary and care has been taken to try and avoid unnecessary confusion to voters. Changes or closures have generally been as a result of buildings closing or being unavailable.

The Council currently makes use of 3 mobile units at election time, one at the junction of Harper Avenue and Bentley Avenue (Cross Heath ward), one on the Co-op car park Water Hayes (Chesterton Ward) and the other at the play area Moreton Close (Ravenscliffe ward). These stations are costly, both in terms of hire charges and officer time awaiting delivery of units and portaloos and connecting the cabins to generators. Ideally it would be better if alternative locations could be found but no alternatives have yet to be identified.

The comments made by the Returning Officer in relation to the mobile units can be found at **Appendix A**.

The following polling stations have been highlighted through the consultation exercise as requiring additional investigation.

a) The Zoe School Pool of Dance, CC001

Concerns were raised regarding the lighting and the small size of the building. It is thought that the premise may be suitable for future local government elections but is too small for a combined parliamentary election. The Jubilee Library, Eccleshall Road Loggerheads has been suggested as an alternative venue for a polling station.

The Returning Officer has mentioned this polling station in his response to the consultation:

The dance studio at Loggerheads is a facility not well suited to use as a polling station owing to the poor level of natural light and I would recommend use of my power as Returning Officer to require the school which was formerly used as a polling station be reinstated.

Recommendations:

- i. That the Returning Officer and his staff assess the suitability and availability of the Jubilee Library as a polling station.
- ii. That should the Jubilee Library not be suitable or available that the Returning Officer requires the use of the Hugo Meynell Primary School as a polling station.

b) The Lodge, Wolstanton High School, D0001(map attached)

Concerns have been raised regarding the remoteness of this polling station and the presiding officer reported a number of 'lost' voters who turned up on polling day who were not registered to vote there. There are also concerns regarding the size of the station especially for a combined parliamentary election. A mobile unit was previously

used for this polling district which was deemed unsatisfactory and before this a room in the school was made available.

A suggestion has been made that the care home on Hempstalls Lane be investigated as an alternative venue. Officers have made initial contact with the Care Home but the Manager has indicated that it will not be suitable for polling purposes. A suggestion has also been put forward regarding the Cricketers Pub on Alexandra Road which Officers will investigate further.

The Returning Officer states:

As you will be aware I have considered using my statutory power to require a polling station at Wolstanton High School. With the support of officers at the County Council we have worked with the school and on this basis have used The Lodge. I am aware that the location of this polling station is not ideal as it is located outside the polling area and access is made more complicated by its proximity to the main school gate and the related parking restrictions. It would be my strong desire to find a polling station within the polling area, but I am aware that efforts on the part of you and your staff and local councillors have not come up with a suitable alternative. Prior to our use of The Lodge the polling station was located in a portakabin located on Wolstanton Marsh. My comments above regarding portakabins apply but in this case the situation was made worse by the portakabin being located outside the polling area. Having looked at the geography of the polling area it is evident that it is an area predominately of housing and seems not to contain venues within it which might be considered as polling stations. I would urge that we keep this matter under review with the objective of securing a polling station within the polling area, even if this is a portakabin, but ideally of finding a suitable building. I would request that we again make a call in that community for any local knowledge of potentially suitable venues.

Recommendations:

That the Returning Officer and his staff investigate alternative polling stations for the D0001 polling district, including the Cricketers Arms and request information on any other possible venues from elected members and member of the public.

c) Holy Trinity Scout Hut, at Rear of Holy Trinity Centre, Off Grosvenor Road(H0003)

Concerns were raised regarding the situation of this new polling station, that additional signage was required and that the trees had obscured the entrance to the station. Many complaints were received on polling day regarding the situation of the station. Previously the Baptist Church Hall on London Road had been used as a polling station but this had become unavailable this year. Reports have now been received that the overgrown trees have been cut back to allow visitors to see the signage to the venue.

The Retuning Officer states in his response to the consultation:

Following the Baptist Church Hall being put up for sale we relocated the polling station to the Scout Hut off Grosvenor Road. I would wish to recommend that we monitor this situation and seek to negotiate access to the Church Hall on London Road with the new owner provided that its future use is appropriate. In the meantime I would request that we consider alternative locations for this polling station and that if this is not possible that additional signage be provided to ensure that electors unfamiliar with the vicinity can identify the location of the Scout Hut.

Recommendations:

That as per the response from the Returning Officer, the situation be monitored and officers seek to negotiate access to the Church Hall on London Road with the new owner provided that its future use is appropriate. In the meantime consideration be given to alternative locations for this polling station and that if this is not possible that additional signage be provided to ensure that electors unfamiliar with the vicinity can identify the location of the Scout Hut.

d) Youth Centre, Clough Hall School

Building and demolition work is scheduled to be carried out by the school in 2015 so an alternative polling station may be required.

Recommendations:

That the Returning Officer and his staff investigate whether the youth centre will remain available and if not identify an alternative polling station.

e) St George's Church Room (H0002)

One comment was received on polling day regarding the use of a place of worship as a polling station.

The Returning Officer has also made the following comments regarding this:

We use a number of venues as polling stations which are linked to places of worship. In the vast majority of cases we use the non-consecrated areas of these venues. It is important that we respect religious observance and diversity and I would therefore wish to recommend that where a suitable non-consecrated space is available that this is used in preference to a consecrated space.

Recommendation:

That where possible a suitable non-consecrated space is used in preference to a consecrated space.

f) Newcastle Golf Club Bridge Room

Concerns were raised prior to the elections in May regarding the distance that some electors had to travel to reach this polling station and requests were made that we use Newcastle Community High School again.

The Returning Officer states:

Newcastle Golf Club is in most regards a suitable polling station but is not as preferable as Newcastle Community High School. I would recommend use of my power as Returning Officer to require the school which was formerly used as the polling station to be reinstated as the polling station.

Equality issues

Local authorities must also comply with the following access requirements. As part of the review, they must:

- a) Seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in the local authority area have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances
- b) Seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place for which it is responsible is accessible to electors who are disabled

The council must have regard to the accessibility to disabled persons of potential polling stations in any place which it is considering designating as a polling place or the designation of which as a polling place it is reviewing.

3. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 (Part 4) placed a duty on Councils to carry out a review of all of its polling districts and places before 31 December 2007.

Local authorities must comply with the following legislative requirements regarding the designation of polling districts and polling places:

- a) Each parish in England and community in Wales is to be a separate polling district, unless special circumstances apply,
- b) The council must designate a polling place for each polling district, unless the size or other circumstances of a polling district are such that the situation of the polling stations does not materially affect the convenience of the electors,
- c) The polling place must be an area in the district, unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the district (for example, if no accessible polling place can be identified in the district,)
- d) The polling place must be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the district how they will be able to reach the polling station.

Use of schools

It should be noted that for the purpose of taking the poll in England and Wales, the (Acting) Returning Officer is entitled to use free of charge schools maintained or assisted by a local authority as well as those schools that receive grants made out of moneys provided by Parliament. This includes academies and free schools.

4. **Financial and Resource Implications**

There are no cost implications identified in this report but there have been resource implications in carrying out the review outside existing budgets, which have been absorbed into day to day duties

List of Appendices

Appendix A – Response from the Returning Officer
Appendix B – Map for Thistleberry Polling Districts
Appendix C – Map for May Bank