



Northumberland

County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 11 September 2024

Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

Report of the Acting Returning Officer, Dr Helen Paterson

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

This report does not align directly to any of the priorities in the Council Plan but is required to ensure compliance with the relevant legislation, namely the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013).

2. Purpose of report

The Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013) introduced a compulsory duty for all parliamentary polling districts and polling places to be reviewed every five years. Such a compulsory review in Northumberland fell due to take place in a period commencing not earlier than 1 October 2023, and public notice of the review was published on 1 July 2024.

This report sets out the Acting Returning Officer's final proposals for polling districts and polling places arising from the compulsory review having considered all responses received during consultation undertaken during the review process.

A relevant local authority is required to formally consider the results of the compulsory review of polling places and polling districts (hereafter referred to as 'the review'), decide on future polling district and polling place arrangements, and to publish its findings.

3. Recommendations

It is recommended that Council:

- (a) Note the outcome of the review of polling places and polling districts and approves the Acting Returning Officer's proposals as set out in this report and appendices;
- (b) Authorises the Acting Returning Officer to publish the outcome of the review of polling places and polling districts (as agreed by Council) at County Hall, Morpeth in at least one conspicuous place within the Authority's area and on the Authority's website.
- (c) Delegates authority to make any necessary in year changes to polling places and polling districts to the Acting Returning Officer in consultation with Group Leaders.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

Not applicable

5. Background

- 5.1 A polling district is a geographical area created by the sub-division of an electoral area, such as a Parliamentary constituency or Council electoral division, for the purposes of administering an election. A polling place is the building or area in which the Acting Returning Officer will allocate a polling station. A polling station is the room or area within the polling place where the actual process of voting takes place. Unlike polling districts and polling places which are fixed by the local authority, polling stations are chosen by the Acting Returning Officer for the election.
- 5.2 It is a legal requirement for relevant local authorities to periodically review polling districts and polling places within their area. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places, requiring that such reviews must take place every five years commencing from October 2013. The last review of polling places and polling districts in Northumberland commenced in 2019 and was reported to Council on 6 November 2019. The current five-yearly review must commence no earlier than 1 October 2023 and be concluded by 1 January 2025.
- 5.3 As part of the compulsory review local authorities must consider the accessibility of potential polling stations when considering designating or reviewing a polling place. All electors should have such reasonable facilities for voting which are practicable in the circumstances; and so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place must be accessible to electors who are disabled. The Electoral Commission has published information on factors to be considered when reviewing existing polling places or when assessing new polling places, including location, size, availability, accessibility requirements (an accessibility checklist) and the requirements of the Elections Act 2022. This guidance, along with all legal requirements, has been carefully considered during the review.
- 5.4 It should be noted that polling places and polling districts adopted for Parliamentary elections will also be effective for local government elections.
- 5.5 **Recent Boundary Reviews**

- 5.1.1** In 2023 the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) made final recommendations regarding the future location and boundaries of UK Parliamentary constituencies in what has become known as ‘the 2023 Review’. This made changes to constituencies covering Northumberland which was effective at the Parliamentary general election held on 4 July 2024 with the geographical area of Northumberland covered by Blyth and Ashington Constituency, Hexham Constituency, North Northumberland Constituency and part of the Cramlington and Killingworth Constituency.
- 5.1.2** Previously, in 2021 the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) notified the Authority of its intention to conduct an Electoral Review of Northumberland. This Electoral Review took place between 2021 and 2023. Final recommendations were published by the LGBCE on 31 October 2023 and the order which gave effect to these recommendations came into force on 15 October 2024. The LGBCE’s recommendations make changes to Northumberland’s current electoral division boundaries and the new electoral arrangements of 69 single member divisions will come into force at the local elections in 2025.
- 5.1.3** Accordingly, as part of this review, it has been necessary to reflect both the BCE’s changes to Parliamentary constituencies; and to reflect the LGBCE changes to Northumberland’s divisions and the recommendations in the proposals presented to Council in this report therefore take account of all changes created from the respective BCE and LGBCE boundary reviews.

5.1 Process of Review

- 5.6.1** Although not part of the statutory review process, local authorities can undertake a preliminary review of polling places to establish the suitability and identify potential alternatives where required.
- 5.6.2** In March 2024, Northumberland County Council undertook such a review because of Local Government boundary changes following a review of Northumberland’s electoral arrangements by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE), the impact of new UK Parliamentary constituency boundaries, and implementation of the significant legislative changes which form part of the Elections Act 2022.
- 5.6.3** The formal statutory review notice advising details of the review was published on the Authority’s website and this launched a period of public consultation which ran from 1 July 2024 to 31st July 2024. This public consultation was also highlighted via the Authority’s social media channels.
- 5.6.4** Any elector in the constituency may make representations on the designation of polling places and this was emphasised in the public notice, on the Authority’s website and in the Authority’s social media postings. Representations were also specifically invited from all serving Northumberland Councillors, Parish Clerks and election agents standing at the elections in May and July 2024 in Northumberland. By doing so, key stakeholders involved in the electoral process have been given the opportunity to participate in the review.
- 5.6.5** In reviewing polling places, representations were actively sought from persons / organisations considered to have particular expertise in relation to the access to premises and facilities for persons who have different forms of disability.
- 5.6.6** Having considered all representations received and having regard to legislative requirements and the Electoral Commission’s guidance, the Acting Returning

Officer (ARO) has produced a final set of proposals attached to this report for Council's consideration. These proposals also reflect experience gained from recent elections and feedback of elections staff who have managed polling stations at these elections, along with feedback from other stakeholders in the elections process, and the likely availability of premises for future elections. For these reasons, these proposals are recommended for approval by full Council. The ARO proposals and comments for Northumberland's 69 electoral divisions are attached as an appendix to this report.

- 5.6.7** Any changes agreed by Council to polling districts and polling places will be incorporated in the revised Register of Electors in December 2024.
- 5.6.8** Following the current review, details of the new polling districts and polling places must be made available to the public at the Authority's offices at County Hall, Morpeth and in at least one conspicuous place in each constituency, and on the Authority's website. Together with the reasons for the final decision of the review, the following must also be published:
- (a) all correspondence sent to the Acting Returning Officer in connection with the review,
 - (b) all correspondence sent to any person whom the authority contacted because they have particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for disabled people
 - (c) all representations made by any person in connection with the review
 - (d) the minutes of any meeting held by the authority to consider any revision to the designation of polling districts or polling places within its area as a result of the review
 - (e) details of the designation of polling districts or polling places within its area as a result of the review; and
 - (f) details of the places where the results of the review have been published.
- 5.6.9** Following the conclusion of the review, certain persons have a right to make representations to the Electoral Commission if those persons consider that the review has not met the reasonable requirements of the electors in a constituency (or any body of electors) or take sufficient account of the accessibility to disabled persons of polling stations within a designated polling place. Section 18D (1) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 sets out who may make representations to the Electoral Commission, namely:
- (a) any parish council,
 - (b) 30 or more registered electors in a constituency (although electors registered anonymously cannot make a representation)
 - (c) a person who made representations to the Authority when the review was being undertaken;
 - (d) a non-electoral whom the Commission determines has a sufficient interest or expertise in relation to the accessibility of disabled persons to the polling stations.

5.6.10 All representations made to the Electoral Commission must be in writing. The representations must be as specific as possible and should clearly state the manner in which it is alleged that the Authority has failed to properly conduct the review. These are:

- (a) the Authority has failed to take into account the reasonable requirements of the electors in the constituency;
- (b) the Authority has failed to take sufficient account of accessibility to disabled persons of the polling station(s) within a polling place.

5.6.11 Representations based on any other premise will not be considered. The Electoral Commission will set out in writing its conclusions and the reasons for its decision and may direct the Authority to consider any alterations to the polling places that the Electoral Commission deems necessary under the review.

6. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

6.1 The following decision options are available for consideration by Council:

Option 1

To receive and agree the changes to the Polling Districts and Polling Places as set out by the Acting Returning Officer.

Option 2

Request that officers undertake further work to identify alternative proposals to those submitted to full Council and report back to a future Council meeting.

6.2 **Option 1** is the recommended option for the following reasons: -

- 1) The review outlined in this report fulfils a number of important requirements on the Authority, including a duty to implement polling district and polling place arrangements which will put into effect the outcomes from recent boundary reviews undertaken by the BCE and LGBCE. With regard to changes brought about by the LGBCE review in particular, these are timebound as arrangements must be in place to reflect new electoral arrangements for the local elections which will take place on 1 May 2025. To ensure that the necessary electoral administration can be undertaken in time for the local elections on that date, it is essential that new polling districts and polling places are agreed by Council. If they are not agreed at this juncture there may not be sufficient time for the required preparation necessary for the local elections in May 2025.
- 2) The review as set out has been informed by engagement with members of the public, elected Members, and political parties active in Northumberland.
- 3) The review has considered intelligence gained from debriefs following previous elections which have taken place in Northumberland in which feedback from officers involved in administering elections, and other stakeholders, has been considered.

7. Implications

Policy	Not applicable
Finance and value for money	Not applicable
Legal	The requirements of the relevant legislation (the Representation of the People Act 1983, and the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013) are set out in the main body of this report. In accordance with the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 the functions relating to elections referred to in this report are matters for full Council.
Procurement	Not Applicable
Human resources	Not Applicable
Property	Not Applicable
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	Yes Reference has been paid to the Electoral Commission accessibility guidance in undertaking the review.
Risk assessment	None
Crime and disorder	Not Applicable
Customer considerations	The consultation gave an opportunity for all residents of Northumberland to provide their views.
Carbon reduction	Not Applicable
Health and wellbeing	Not Applicable
Wards	(All Wards);

8. Background papers

Acting Returning Officer's Proposals.
Interactive Map

9. Links to other key reports already published

Not Applicable

10. Author and Contact Details

Mark Crawford, Elections Manager. Email-mark.crawford@northumberland.gov.uk

Lynsey Denyer, Head of Member Services and Elections. Email:
Lynsey.Denyer@northumberland.gov.uk