

Polling Districts and Polling Places Review 2023

Timetable	
Meeting	Date
Democracy and General Purposes Committee	20 November 2023
Council	29 November 2023

Will this be a Key Decision?	Not Applicable
Urgency	Not Applicable
Final Decision-Maker	Council
Lead Head of Service	Angela Woodhouse, Director of Strategy, Insight and Governance
Lead Officer and Report Author	Ryan O'Connell, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

To agree the outcome of the Polling Districts and Polling Places Review 2023, taking into account the statutory requirement for a review and the multiple boundary reviews that have taken place in 2022 and 2023.

Purpose of Report

Recommendation to Council

This report makes the following recommendation to the Committee

That Council be recommended to agree the outcome of the Polling Districts and Polling Places Review 2023 set out at Appendix 1.

Polling Districts and Polling Places Review 2023

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
<p>Impact on Corporate Priorities</p>	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <p>We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities. However, they will support the Council’s overall achievement of its aims through ensuring the integrity and effective administration of elections.</p>	<p>Democratic and Electoral Services Manager</p>
<p>Cross Cutting Objectives</p>	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of cross cutting objectives. However, they will support the Council’s overall achievement of its aims through ensuring the integrity and effective administration of elections.</p>	<p>Democratic and Electoral Services Manager</p>
<p>Risk Management</p>	<p>Having appropriate districts and designated polling places is a key mitigation to election risks and avoiding failures on polling day. Agreeing the recommendation therefore directly helps to manage the risk of election failure.</p>	<p>Democratic and Electoral Services Manager</p>

Financial	The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team
Staffing	We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing, and the Returning Officer will be responsible for ensuring the polling stations, located within the polling places identified are appropriately staffed.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Legal	<p>The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 requires the Council to conduct a review of the Borough’s polling districts and polling places every five years. The Council is also required to keep polling arrangements under review. A full review must be conducted between 1 October 2023 and 28 February 2025.</p> <p>This review has been timed to follow the Boundary Commission for England’s Parliamentary Boundary Review, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England’s Borough Ward review and the Council’s Community Governance Review (Parishes).</p> <p>All necessary notice and consultation requirements for conducting a Polling District and Polling Place review have been met.</p>	Team Leader (Contentious and Corporate Governance)
Information Governance	The recommendations do not impact personal information (as defined in UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018) the Council processes.	Policy and Information Team
Equalities	<p>Accessibility of polling places is a key element of the review and has been consulted on and factored into the consideration of each polling place. This includes the physical location of the building as well as the access to the building itself. It is crucial that voting in person remains accessible to all.</p> <p>Furthermore, the Elections Act 2022 increased</p>	Equalities & Communities Officer

	the accessibility expectations on Returning Officers and polling places. Feedback from the elections that were held in May 2023 will be included in polling station training and setup.	
Public Health	None	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Crime and Disorder	None	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Procurement	None	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Biodiversity and Climate Change	Whilst biodiversity and climate change considerations are not statutory considerations for polling place locations there are minor impacts that arise for the movement of electors on polling day. It is important that whilst it is necessary for some electors to drive to polling places, particularly in rural areas, that consideration is given to accessibility of polling places on foot too.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 requires the Council to conduct a review of the Borough's polling districts and polling places every five years. The Council is also required to keep polling arrangements under review. A full review must be conducted between 1 October 2023 and 28 February 2025.
- 2.2 The review has been timed to take place as soon as possible within the given period as there are a combination of significant boundary changes across Maidstone Borough:
- Parliamentary Constituencies – these have changed from 2 parliamentary constituencies to 3 parliamentary constituencies across Maidstone Borough as a result of the Boundary Commission for England's review.
 - Maidstone Borough Council Ward Boundaries (and some parish wards) – these have changed from 26 wards to 22 wards as a result of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's review.

- Parish Boundaries have changed as a result of Maidstone Borough Council's Community Governance Review.
- 2.3 Following the boundary changes and the polling district and polling place review the new 2023/24 electoral register will be published on 1 December 2023 ahead of any UK Parliamentary Election that may be called, and the scheduled whole Maidstone Borough Council and Parish Council elections scheduled for May 2024.
- 2.4 Appendix 1 sets out the proposed polling districts and polling places for the electoral register and all elections. Initial proposals were consulted on from 10 October 2023 to 7 November 2023 and 111 responses were received. Appendix 1 has considered those responses and amendments made accordingly.
- 2.5 Overall the significant majority of respondents were in favour of proposals, a small minority of responses did not agree with some of the proposals. These can be broken down further into three categories:
1. Responses that objected but on the basis that they did not like the new wards put in place by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. This is not covered by the scope of the review.
 2. Responses that provided a 'no' response to the suitability of polling places, but provided no further information or alternative proposals.
 3. Responses that suggested alternatives, or raised considerations and queries. These were considered in depth.
- 2.6 Set out below are the responses to the category 3 comments on polling places including changes as a result.

Allington and Bridge Ward

- 2.7 The number, capacity and location of existing proposals is considered to be sufficient for the ward. In addition Heritage Park Community Centre is on the boundary between Maidstone Borough Council and Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council. At the next Parliamentary Election, the two Local Authorities will be part of the same Constituency and it is felt that in lieu of an overriding reason it is best not to use a polling place in that position.

Bearsted & Downswood Ward

- 2.8 Recent unscheduled parish by-elections have caused disruption to the Hall Users at King George V Memorial Hall and it is difficult to book at short notice. Given the proximity of the two halls available in this area, and the capacity in the Women's Institute to hold a double polling station in the main hall, there is the opportunity to withdraw from using King George V Memorial Hall and no longer displace the Hall Users at short notice, and reduce difficulties in booking polling places.

Boxley Downs Ward

- 2.9 Ideally, we would like to have a polling station within the parish of Thurnham. However, due to the lack of community facilities available in Thurnham this is not achievable. Historically North Thurnham have voted at Detling Village Hall and South Thurnham have voted at the Women's Institute, The Street, Bearsted. Suggested proposals to change that arrangement highlighted the distances required to be travelled by a small number of electors.
- 2.10 Therefore, following consideration of feedback from the consultation it would be reasonable that the current arrangements remain the same and the electors of Thurnham South continue to use the small hall at the Women's Institute. This does create a risk of different groups of electors (voting in different elections) attending the same polling place, but this can be sufficiently mitigated by using a separate hall in the same place.

Harrietsham, Lenham and North Downs Ward

- 2.11 Previous polling place reviews have been held to remove the use of The Harrow Inn, Warren Street as a polling place. The electors of Otterden and Wichling will be allocated Lenham Community Centre as their polling place.
- 2.12 It is proposed that Platts Heath Village Hall (St Edmund Centre) is no longer used as a polling place due to the lack of parking and the traffic congestion caused during school pick up and drop off times. Therefore, all the electors of Lenham Parish will be allocated to Lenham Community Centre.

Headcorn and Sutton Valence Ward

- 2.13 Previous polling place reviews have been held to remove the use of The Hawkenbury Public House as a polling place. The Headcorn electors who went to the Hawkenbury will be allocated Headcorn Village Hall as their polling place and join the remainder of Headcorn Parish.
- 2.14 Previous polling place reviews have been held to remove the use of The Hawkenbury Public House as a polling place. The Sutton Valence electors who went to the Hawkenbury will be allocated Sutton Valence Village Hall as their polling place and join the remainder of Sutton Valence Parish.

Park Wood and Mangravet Ward

- 2.15 There were concerns raised about not having Heather House available. These were considered and addressed through two changes that have increased available capacity in Christ Church Hall.
- (i) The ward boundary changes to Boughton Monchelsea and Chart Sutton Ward have resulted in the reallocation of the polling district of Pested Bars Estate to Boughton Monchelsea Village Hall from Christ Church Hall.
 - (ii) Some of the Park Wood electors that currently use Christ Church Hall have been reallocated to Grace Community Church.

Therefore, there is capacity for the remaining electors of Park Wood to be allocated to Christ Church Hall and no longer use Heather House. However, once the new Heather House facilities are available this will be reviewed.

Staplehurst Ward

- 2.16 A number of concerns were raised about using Staplehurst Library when the Staplehurst Village Centre had capacity for two polling stations. The issue being addressed by using the library is slightly different to this concern.
- 2.17 The expansion of the parish of Staplehurst means that for a Parliamentary Election there would need to be at least three polling stations at Staplehurst Village Centre. During the pandemic both the North and South Hall were used. However, this unfavourably displaced the Preschool and makes booking difficult, particularly at short notice.
- 2.16 It is therefore proposed to use both the Staplehurst Village Centre and Staplehurst Library as polling places. The east of Staplehurst parish will remain at Staplehurst Village Centre and the west of Staplehurst parish to be allocated to Staplehurst Library. Therefore, removing the need to cross the busy A229 and reduce disruption and displacement of the Preschool.

Additional Review and Proposal Context

- 2.17 Polling Districts on 1 December 2023 Register - Advice was sought from the Electoral Commission on the supply of the register to Councillors and others who have the right to a copy on the basis of the areas they have been elected to represent (i.e. current wards). Those areas will no longer explicitly exist in the new register and (e.g.) ward members are not entitled to the register for the new wards only the current ones. The guidance received and implemented in this review is to create small polling districts where required so that the current wards can still be created when distributing the register. This has resulted in numerous smaller polling districts that are in effect temporary and will no longer be required to be sub divided once the new wards are in place from May 2024.
- 2.18 Permission from the LGBCE to implement parish changes that impact on parish wards which the LGBCE put in place in the last five years was granted on 7 November 2023. The necessary orders as agreed by council will now be put in place before 1 December 2023.
- 2.19 Related alterations to Borough Ward and County Divisional boundaries are not yet in place and are expected to take place over the next few months and may or may not be in place before the elections in May 2024.
- 2.20 Therefore, this review has taken into account the proposed parish changes as they are expected to be implemented before the register is published on 1 December 2023, but not the related alterations as they will not be in place in time.
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3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 The Committee could agree to recommend the adoption of Appendix 1 as the outcome of the review to Council.
 - 3.2 The Committee could decide to recommend the adoption of an amended Appendix 1 to the Council.
 - 3.3 The Committee could decide to rerun the review but this would mean the new register could not be published on time and would need to be delayed. Late publication of the register is possible but would have significant impacts on council election preparation, providing access to the register and can impact how credit is handled for residents.
 - 3.4 Do nothing is not an option as the Council has had several boundary changes take place and an outcome from the review is required in order to be able to publish the electoral register on 1 December 2023.
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4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That Council be recommended to agree the outcome of the Polling Districts and Polling Places Review 2023 set out at Appendix 1 as it takes into account the views of the Returning Officer, results of the consultation, assessments of individual places carried out by officers and technical requirements for polling districts.
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5. RISK

- 5.1 Assess if within the council's risk appetite and any mitigating actions proposed if needed.

The purpose of the risk section of the report is to understand the risks to the council of the options that members are considering, including the risk of not taking action, and assess them against the council's risk appetite.

6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 It is a requirement of a Polling District and Polling Place Review that a consultation takes place including the groups impacted by such a review, electors and (Acting) Returning Officers. This has been conducted and the considerations of the outcomes of that review have been factored into this report and the final recommendations, including some changes arising from the feedback received.
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7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 The recommendation from this Committee will be taken to Council for agreement on 29 November 2023, following agreement the register will be published with the new polling districts in place on 1 December 2023.
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8. REPORT APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Polling Districts and Polling Places

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Information on the consultation including static and interactive maps can be found here:

<https://letstalkmaidstone.uk.engagementhq.com/polling-districts-review-2023>