

Item 6

REPORT TO COUNCIL

28TH SEPTEMBER, 2007

REPORT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Portfolio: Strategic Leadership

Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Electoral Administration Act 2006 requires the Council to complete a review of polling districts and polling places by the end of 2007 and at least every four years thereafter. This report explains the review process, the work carried out to date and makes recommendations regarding polling district boundaries and polling places.

2. Recommendations

- i) That the existing polling district boundaries remain unchanged.
- ii) That the polling places indicated on the schedule in Appendix A be approved.
- iii) That the Acting Returning Officers for the Sedgefield and Bishop Auckland Parliamentary Constituencies be consulted on the proposals.
- iv) That the proposals be given appropriate publicity in accordance with the legislation.
- v) That the results of the review be also applied to local government polling districts and places.

3. Background

- 3.1 Local authorities are required to divide their administrative area into polling districts for the purposes of parliamentary elections and to designate polling places for these polling districts, and to keep these under review.

- 3.2 By conducting this statutory review of polling districts and places, local authorities must demonstrate that they have, as far as is practicable, met the criteria set out in the legislation.
- 3.3 Relevant authorities must :-
- a) seek to ensure that all the electors in the constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.
 - b) seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable, the polling places they are responsible for are accessible to all electors, including those who are disabled, and when considering the designation of a polling place, must have regard to the accessibility needs of disabled persons.
- 3.4 In an ideal world electoral administrators would have the choice of a range of fully accessible buildings, conveniently located for the electors in the area. In practice, however, this is not always the case and there may be little choice available. If it is necessary to use a place where the access is not ideal then every reasonable adjustment is undertaken to provide access for all electors.

4. The Review Process

- 4.1 The legislation requires that a review of polling districts and polling places must be conducted by the end of 2007 and at least every four years thereafter.
- 4.2 The first stage of the review process is giving notice of the review and a Notice was therefore published in The Northern Echo on 13th August, 2007.

Notices were also displayed at the Council Offices, Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre and on the Council's website. The Acting Returning Officers (ARO) of the Sedgefield and Bishop Auckland Constituencies together with the Council's access officer were also notified of the review and invited to comment.

- 4.3 This review cannot change the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies. Only the division of the constituencies into polling districts and polling places is the subject of the review. A polling district is an area created by the division of a constituency into smaller parts within which a polling place can be determined. A polling place is a building or area in which polling stations will be selected by the ARO. The Council is

- responsible for dividing its area into polling districts and for designating a polling place for every polling district. The designation of polling stations is a matter for the ARO.
- 4.4 Polling districts and places for local government elections are not automatically part of this review under the 2006 Act. However polling districts and places for UK parliamentary and local government elections should always be the same so it is recommended that the results of this review be applied to local government polling districts and places also.
- 4.5 The Council is required to seek to ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable. It must also seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable the polling places it is responsible for are accessible to all electors including those who are disabled and must take into consideration their accessibility needs.
- 4.6 The Council's current polling district and place arrangements were made on 20th December 2002 and require updating to reflect changes that have been implemented over the past 5 years.

5. Proposals

- 5.1 No requests have been received for polling district boundaries to be changed and it is therefore recommended that existing polling district boundaries be approved. All of the existing polling places have been used this year for the Borough and Parish elections in May 2007 and some for the Parliamentary By Election for the Sedgefield Constituency in July 2007.
- 5.2 Presiding Officers were requested to give an assessment of whether there was adequate access for the disabled to their Polling Places and Polling Stations and with the exception of 6 premises no problems were identified. The use of alternative rooms/ramps will assist at the 6 premises identified. The Electoral Commission in their report on the election stated " The Electoral Commission observed a number of polling stations in Sedgefield and on the whole they were fully accessible". The Council's Access Officer identified some premises which had problems with door widths and disabled access but did not identify any alternative premises.
- 5.3 A common complaint by electors is that their polling station has been moved and they find it more difficult to get to the new one. Consideration should therefore always be given as to whether a change in polling district or place will bring a benefit to the electors in any area. It is therefore recommended that the polling places indicated on the schedule in Appendix A be approved as they provide electors with reasonable

facilities for voting and so far as is reasonable and practicable, are accessible to all electors including the disabled.

6. The Consultation Stage

- 6.1 The consultation stage is for representations and comments on the proposals for polling districts and polling places. The Council is required to consult the ARO's for each of the two parliamentary constituencies in the Borough area on the proposals.
- 6.2 A notice regarding the proposals will be published in The Northern Echo and displayed at the Council Offices, Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre and on the Council's website inviting comments from electors and other stakeholders.
- 6.3 Final proposals for the new polling districts and polling places will be produced after taking into consideration all representations received and will be reported to Council at its next meeting.

7. Resource Implications

- 7.1 There are no financial issues arising directly from this report.

8. Consultations

- 8.1 Consultations have been carried out with the A.R.Os. for the two parliamentary constituencies, and appropriate notices published in accordance with the legislation.

9. Links to Corporate Aims and Objectives.

- 9.1 The review of polling districts and polling places supports the corporate aim of increasing democracy and inclusion and the corporate objective of encouraging greater participation in local democracy.

10. Equality and Diversity

- 10.1 Publication of the Notice of the review gave all disabled groups the opportunity to submit representations regarding polling districts and places and the Council's Access Officer visited each polling place and made comment on accessibility for disabled persons.

11. Risk Management

11.1 If the Council did not carry out the review of polling districts and polling places then it would not be complying with the legislation and could be the subject of a complaint to the Electoral Commission by an individual or organization regarding that non-compliance.

11.2 The Electoral Commission could then carry out the review itself and impose its proposals on the Council.

12. Health and Safety

12.1 No additional implications have been identified.

13. Legal and Constitutional

13.1 No legal or constitutional implications have been identified other than those dealt with in the report.

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Ward(s)

Background Papers

Electoral Administration Act 2006
Representation of the People Act 1983
Electoral Commission Circular EC28/2007
Examination by Statutory Officers

	Yes	Not Applicable
1. The report has been examined by the Council's Head of the Paid Service or his representative.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The content has been examined by the Council's S.151 Officer or his representative.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The content has been examined by the Council's Monitoring Officer or his representative.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Management Team has approved the report.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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