

# Policy Committee

19 February 2024



**Reading**  
Borough Council  
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<b>Title</b>	Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2023-25
<b>Purpose of the report</b>	To make a recommendation to Council
<b>Report status</b>	Public report
<b>Report author</b>	Mike Graham, Returning Officer
<b>Lead Councillor</b>	Cllr Jason Brock, Leader of the Council and Cllr Liz Terry, Deputy Leader and Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources
<b>Corporate priority</b>	Not applicable, but still requires a decision
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>To recommend to Council:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. That the results of the consultation on the 2023-24 Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Appendix A), and the Returning Officer's written submission (Appendix B), be received and noted.</li><li>2. That the changes to Polling Places made since the 2019 review, to accommodate the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's (LGBCE's) 2019-20 review of ward boundaries in Reading, implemented in 2022 and set out in para. 3.22, be noted.</li><li>3. That the impact of the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) review of Parliamentary Constituency boundaries, and the changes to Parliamentary Constituencies covering Reading made in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020, be noted, in particular those arising from the Act basing the new Parliamentary Constituencies on the pre-2019-20 review ward boundaries; and that the necessarily consequent creation of the additional Polling Districts listed below to deal with the anomalies arising be approved:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3.1. Polling District BC in Battle ward to serve the even numbered properties on the west side of Wantage Road which will vote in Battle Library Polling Station</li><li>3.2. Polling District JC in Norcot ward to serve houses (even numbers) to the south of Cockney Hill and Cheddington Close which will vote in St Michael's Primary School</li><li>3.3. Polling District BB in Battle ward to serve Stone Street, Tidmarsh Street, Pangbourne Street, Ivydene Road, Ledbury Close which will vote in the Emmanuel Methodist Church</li></ol></li><li>4. That the following changes be made to the number of Polling Stations at the Polling Places listed below:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>4.1. Battle Polling District B – Battle Library – establish a second Polling Station</li><li>4.2. Battle Polling District BA - Emmanuel Methodist Church - establish a fourth Polling Station</li><li>4.3. Norcot Polling District JA – St Michael's Primary School – establish a second Polling Station</li></ol></li></ol>

	<p>5. That with regard to the responses to the public consultation on the 2023-24 Polling Districts and Polling Places Review, set out in Appendices A and B:</p> <p>5.1. On Caversham ward District CA, the Returning Officer consulted with the Caversham ward Councillors about the proposal to utilise Our Lady and St Annes Caversham Church as a Polling Place to replace New Bridge Nursery School which presently hosts two Polling Stations. The Caversham ward Councillors wish the Polling Place to remain at New Bridge Nursery School.</p> <p>5.2. the position and response concerning Abbey Polling District AB in light of the proposed closure of Reading Central Library be noted; and in this regard, having received the views and preference of the Abbey ward Councillors, and their preferred location as an alternative Polling Place being Abbey Baptist Church be implemented by the Returning Officer after 2024 elections.</p> <p>5.3. it be noted that the anomaly to locate all the properties in the range 37-91 Lowfield Road in Emmer Green ward Polling District GB was corrected in 2022</p> <p>5.4. no change be made to the location of the Polling Place for Whitley Polling District PC, where the Whitley ward Councillors have been consulted and wish to retain the Polling Station at 100 Longwater Avenue</p> <p>5.5. the Returning Officer having consulted with the Church ward Councillors, regarding the use of Tyndale Baptist Church as an alternative Polling Place for Church Polling District E in anticipation of the temporary closure for refurbishment works at the Guide and Scout HQ making the building unavailable for elections in 2024 implement their decision to utilise the Tyndale Baptist Church as the Temporary Polling Place.</p> <p>6. That the following changes to Polling Districts are agreed:</p> <p>6.1. Wantage Hall and St Georges Hall be moved from Redlands ward district LD into Redlands ward district LA</p> <p>6.2. Numbers 1,3,5,7,9 Whitley Park Lane be moved from Redlands ward LC into Redlands ward district LD</p> <p>6.3. Katesgrove HC Polling District be abolished and all properties in it be moved into Katesgrove ward H Polling District (Katesgrove School)</p> <p>7. That the Returning Officer, be authorised to implement all appropriate actions arising from the review and discussed in this report, in consultation where appropriate with affected ward Councillors.</p>
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## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report sets out the results of the current (2023-24) review of Polling Districts and Polling Places in Reading, with recommendations to change some Polling Places for future local and Parliamentary elections. The last review took place in 2018/19 (the 2019 review) and was reported to Council on 26 March 2019 (minute 26 refers).

## 2. Policy Context

- 2.1. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 (the 2013 Act), and the Electoral Administration Act 2006 (the 2006 Act), do not provide for councils to review constituency or ward boundaries (these responsibilities sit with the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) and the Local Government Boundary Commission for

England (LGBCE)), and the regular review of Polling Districts and Polling Stations by councils must therefore take place within the existing constituency and ward boundaries.

- 2.2. The Council's ward boundaries were last reviewed in 2019-20. This established the current boundaries of wards. There have been no further changes to ward boundaries to date. However, the LGBCE review the position annually, based on the electoral register for the authority published on 1 December each year.
- 2.3. The LGBCE undertook an electoral review of the Council in its 2019-20 programme. This is because the 2017 canvass showed over 30% of the authority's current wards (5 out of 16) had a variance greater than 10% from the authority's average ratio of electors, which was 2,443 per Councillor or 7,329 per 3-member ward.
- 2.4. The LGBCE published its Final Recommendations on 29 September 2020 and the Order was laid before Parliament in January 2021. The Order provided for a Council of 48 Members, representing 16 three-member seats, all elected by thirds. Each ward is divided into a smaller number of Polling Districts, with their own Polling Places. A Polling Place is the building within which one or more Polling Stations are located. The new warding arrangements came into effect in May 2022, when all-out elections for all 16 wards were held.
- 2.5. As a summary, the are the changes brought about by the LGBCE review in 2020:

Abbey	Central core of Abbey ward, with north and eastern areas transferred to new Thames ward, and small transfers to Coley and Redlands ward; and the small part of Battle ward east of railway transferred to Abbey ward.
Battle	Core of current ward, with small transfers to Abbey, Coley, and from and Norcot and Kentwood wards.
Caversham	Northern part of Caversham ward and southern part of Thames wards
Caversham Heights	Mapledurham ward and northern part of Thames ward, plus small transfer from Peppard ward
Church	Core of current ward, plus north-eastern parts of Whitley ward; and transfers to Redlands around university (excluding Northcourt Avenue); and to Whitley south of Hartland Road
Coley	Core of Minster ward, with small transfers to Katesgrove and Southcote, and from Battle wards.
Emmer Green	Core of Peppard ward with small transfers from Thames and Caversham wards
Katesgrove	Core of current ward, with small transfers from Minster ward to align western boundary to Rose Kiln Lane (not River Kennet)
Kentwood	Core of current ward, less small transfer to Battle ward
Norcot	Core of current ward, with minor boundary adjustments with Battle, Southcote and Tilehurst wards
Park	No change
Redlands	Current ward, plus transfers from Abbey and Church
Southcote	Core of current ward, plus transfer of Minster ward west of railway, and boundary adjustments with Norcot ward.

Thames (new)	Southern part of Caversham ward and northern and eastern parts of Abbey ward.
Tilehurst	Core of current ward, with minor boundary adjustment with Norcot and Southcote wards
Whitley	Core of current ward, plus south-western part of Church ward; and less north-eastern parts to Church

- 2.6. Reading has 54 Polling Places, covering 57 Polling Districts, and encapsulating 75 Polling Stations. The current pattern of Polling District boundaries was established following the 2019/20 ward boundary review (see the Plan of the Polling Districts 2023 Appendix C) and was approved by Council on 22 February 2022 (minute 43 refers).

### 3. The Proposal

- 3.1. The 2013 Act introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary Polling Districts and Polling Places. The current compulsory review had to be started and completed between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025 (inclusive). Subsequent compulsory reviews must be started and completed within the period of 16 months that starts on 1 October of every fifth year after 1 October 2023. That is, the next review must be started and completed between 1 October 2028 and 31 January 2030.
- 3.2. Notice of the current (2023-24) review was published on 1 November 2023, on the Council's website, at the Civic Offices, and in the Council's libraries. The deadline for responses was 1 December 2023. Letters and emails were sent to the following interested parties, specifically to invite them to participate in the review:
- All Councillors
  - The Borough MPs
  - Party Agents
  - Polling Station Inspectors at 2023 Elections
  - Organisations receiving papers for the Access Forum
  - Polling Station venue managers
  - Community & Residents' Groups and Associations

A complete list is given in section 6 below.

- 3.3. The current review attracted seven responses a significant decrease from the 37 responses generated by the 2019 review. These are set out in the schedule at Appendix A.
- 3.4. As Returning Officer, I must make a written submission to the review process which comments on the existing Polling Stations and any new Polling Stations and new Polling Districts that may be used based on proposals made in the review. My written submission is at Appendix B.
- 3.5. Both the results of the consultation (Appendix A) and my written submission (Appendix B) have been published on the review page of the Council's website from 21 December 2023.
- 3.6. A plan of the Borough's new (2023) Polling Districts is at Appendix C.
- 3.7. Since the 2019 review of Polling Stations in Reading, there have been three developments which have complicated the situation in the Borough:
- a) The LGBCE undertook an electoral review of the Borough's ward boundaries in 2019-20, which increased the number of Councillors to 48 representing 16 three-member wards covering the whole Borough and was implemented at the local elections in May 2022.

- b) The review of Parliamentary Constituencies undertaken by the BCE in 2019-20, and the consequent Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020 which has established three new Parliamentary constituencies covering the Borough with effect from the next General Election.
- c) The 2020-21 COVID outbreak, which delayed the outcome of the LGBCE review of Reading's ward boundaries until February 2021, which was after the deadline used by the BCE to determine the new Parliamentary Constituencies; as a consequence, the three Parliamentary constituencies which will cover Reading – Central Reading, Reading West and Mid-Berkshire, and Earley & Woodley – are based on the old ward boundaries which applied before 2022, and will continue to be so until the next BCE review is undertaken and implemented.
- 3.8. These developments have resulted in unhelpful inconsistencies between ward and Parliamentary boundaries, as set out below. As a consequence, it is necessary to set up some very small Polling Districts to deal with situations where a small part of a ward will be in a different Parliamentary constituency from the rest of the ward. This affects the following ward boundary areas:

**Central Reading /Reading West & Mid-Berkshire**

- Battle / Norcot ward boundary
- Southcote / Norcot ward boundary

**Central Reading / Earley & Woodley**

- Redlands / Church ward boundary

- 3.9. When the new Parliamentary Constituencies come into effect at the next General Election, the current requirement to retain Polling District HC in Katesgrove ward will end. This is that part of the ward to the west of the River Kennet up to Richfield Avenue which was moved from the former Minster ward in the 2019-20 ward review, but which will remain in the present Reading West constituency until the General Election; Minster ward is currently in Reading West, Katesgrove in Reading East.

**Review Process**

- 3.10. A Polling District is a sub-division of a constituency or ward. A Polling Place is a geographical area within a Polling District in which a Polling Station can be located: there is no legal definition of the term "Polling District", which therefore can be defined tightly or widely. It is possible to have a Polling Station outside the Polling District in special circumstances, in which cases the Polling Place must be clearly specified.
- 3.11. The review is required under Section 16 of the 2006 Act, which amends Section 18 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. Under Section 18C of the amended 1983 Act, a review of each Polling District and Polling Place must be completed before the end of a period of four years starting with the completion of the previous review. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 changed the timing of compulsory reviews of Parliamentary Polling Districts and Polling Places, aligned to the timetable for five-yearly General Elections. Under this, the current review must be completed by 31 January 2025.
- 3.12. The end results must be published in the next new electoral register. Therefore, the results of the 2023 review will be incorporated into a new electoral register to be published on 1 March 2024.
- 3.13. The responsibility for signing off the review rests with Council. The legal position is that Sections 18 and 31 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 allow constituencies and wards to be divided into Polling Districts. Council could delegate these functions to a Committee (or to an officer) but to date it has not done so.
- 3.14. The process is based on parliamentary constituencies. Under Schedule A1 of the Parliamentary Election Rules, it involves a number of specified stages:

The Council must:

- Publish notice of review (this was done 1 November 2023)
- Consult with Returning Officer(s) for parliamentary constituencies in Council areas – and publish these when received (within 30 days of receipt). I am the only Returning Officer for Reading. My response is at Appendix B.
- Seek representations from persons with an expertise in relation to access and disability – who must also have an opportunity to comment on the Returning Officer’s representations (this has been done).
- Any elector may also make representations – which may include proposals for specified alternative Polling Places. These are shown in Appendix A.
- On completion of the review, compile and adopt a revised scheme – which must be published, with reasons given for decisions.

The Returning Officer must:

- Make representations about the location of Polling Places within Polling Districts
- Allocate electors to Polling Stations (after review)

### **Projected Growth**

- 3.15. Appendix B includes indicative information on projected new residential developments in individual wards and Polling Districts, based on the Housing Trajectory in the 2022-23 Annual Monitoring Report which is to be published imminently. The Housing Trajectory forecasts developments what will actually come forward. These figures are for all consents together with Local Plan allocations and give a total of 11,008 new dwellings with hard or soft commitments. The electoral register currently has 76,982 dwellings, so if all of these dwellings were to be built, it would represent an increase of over 14% in dwelling numbers across the Borough.
- 3.16. The majority of the new residential development is projected to take place in three wards: Abbey (3,968 dwellings), Thames (2,626 dwellings) and Whitley (1,757 dwellings).
- 3.17. The growth of residential development in Whitley ward is predominantly to the west of Basingstoke Road, especially to the west of the A33 relief road (Green Park, Madejski stadium).
- 3.18. The growth of residential development in Thames ward is as follows:
- 3.19. The former Homebase/Toys R Us (473 dwellings outstanding, expected completions in 2023-25), Gas Holder on Alexander Turner Close (130, 2025-27), 55 Vastern Road (209, 2025-28), 80 Caversham Road (620, 2028-2032), Station Retail Park (401, 2030-36), Napier Court on Napier Road (261, 2028-33), Forbury Retail Park (388, 2031-36) and Forbury Business Park, Kenavon Drive (238, 2030-34). The last four of these are Local Plan allocations that do not yet have a permission so the number of homes is an estimate based on the allocation.
- 3.20. The growth of residential development in Abbey ward are as follows:
- 3.21. The Station Hill Phase 1 (599, 2024-26), Weldale Street (169 outstanding, 2025-27), Station Hill Phase 3 (375, 2028-31), Broad Street Mall (422, 2026-29), Soane Point at 6-8 Market Place (182, 2025-26), Brunel Arcade & Apex Plaza (401, 2030-36), Cattle Market on Great Knollys Street (450, 2033-36), Chatham Street/Eaton Place area (140, 2032-36) and Hosier Street (683, 2029-34). The last four of these are Local Plan allocations that do not yet have a permission, so the number of homes is an estimate based on the allocation.

### **Polling Stations**

#### **Comments on Polling Places**

3.22. Changes have been made to the location of some of the Polling Places in the Polling Districts, to reflect changes brought about by the LGBC review of 2019/20 and changes made as a result of the Covid Pandemic. Since the review of Polling Places in 2019, the following changes have been made to Polling Places:

- Caversham Primary School which was the Polling Place for old Caversham Polling District MC and Thames Polling District WB is no longer used as a Polling Station.
- Ridgeway Primary School which was located in old Church Polling District NA was changed to the St Barnabas Church Hall in new Church Polling District EA.
- Norcot Community Centre (now demolished) which was located in the old Kentwood Polling District CC was changed to new Lyndhurst Road Community Centre in new Kentwood Polling District IC.
- Ranikhet Academy which was located in old Norcot Polling District EB was changed to Dee Space Community Centre in new Norcot Polling District JB.
- Redlands Primary School which was located in old Redlands Polling District BA is no longer used as a Polling Station.
- Prospect School which was located in old Southcote Polling District FC is no longer used as a Polling Station.
- Park Lane Primary School which was located in old Tilehurst Polling District GA was changed to Tilehurst British Legion which is located in new Tilehurst Polling District OA.
- Geoffrey Field Infants School which was located in old Whitley Polling District SA is no longer used as a Polling Station.
- Mapledurham Pavilion now located in Caversham Heights Polling District DA has resumed its role as a Polling Place.
- A new Polling Place has been created at Park Lounge Windsor Hall UoR which is located in Redlands Polling District LD.
- A new Polling Place has been created at Kennet Island Community Centre which is located in new Whitley Polling District P.
- A new Polling Place has been created at Green Park 100 Longwater Avenue which is located in new Whitley Polling District PC.
- A new Polling Place has been created at South Reading Leisure Centre which is located in new Whitley Polling District PD.

3.23. Appendix B also includes my initial comments on Polling Places. Most are acceptable. However, the following should be noted:

<b>Polling District</b>	<b>Polling Place</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Abbey AB	Reading Central Library	To close at the end of 2024. Will be available for this year's elections. A permanent alternative Polling Station will need to be found. Consultation with ward Councillors is underway.
Church E	Scout and Guide Joint HQ	Planned building works are to commence in spring 2024. Not available May 2023 until January 2025. A temporary Polling Place will need to be found.

## **Comments on Polling Districts**

- 3.24. BCE has carried out a review of Parliamentary Constituencies. The provisions of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020 (the 2020 Act) determine the local (ward) boundaries that the BCE must have regard to which were the ward boundaries extant in December 2020. The BCE utilised the ward boundaries that were extant in Reading in December 2020 and not the new ward boundaries as determined by the LGBCE in its 2019-20 Review which means there are numerous anomalies between the new constituencies' boundaries of the new Reading Central Borough Constituency, the Reading West and Mid-Berkshire Constituency and the Early and Woodley Constituency.
- 3.25. As referred to in Appendix B there are a number of situations where the ward boundaries are impacted, and the new LGBCE ward boundaries create an inconsistency with the new BCE Constituency Boundaries as follows:

### **Central Reading Constituency / Reading West and Mid-Berkshire County Constituency**

#### **Kentwood / Battle ward boundary**

- 3.26. The housing listed below in the south-east corner of Kentwood ward between Portman Road and Oxford Road which contained the Stone Street area was moved into Battle ward and is contained in new Battle Ward district BA. The houses affected which are located in Battle ward district BA are as follows:
- a) Stone Street
  - b) Tidmarsh Street
  - c) Pangbourne Street
  - d) Ivydene Road
  - e) Ledbury Close
- 3.27. It is proposed to create an additional new Polling District BB and a new Polling Station containing the above streets which will vote in the Battle Library Polling Place as these voters will vote in the Reading West and Mid Berkshire County Constituency at a General Election.
- 3.28. Please note the attached Plan which shows the extent of the proposed new district BB shown edged red.

#### **Norcot / Battle ward boundary**

- 3.29. The old ward Boundary (running Northeast to Southwest) between Norcot and Battle wards ran down the middle of Wantage Road. In the LGBCE review the Boundary was moved westwards so that it runs between Wantage and Wilson Roads, moving both sides of Wantage Road into Battle ward district B.
- 3.30. It is proposed to create an additional new Polling District BC and a new Polling Station containing the even properties on the west side of Wantage Road within Battle ward as the voters in this new Polling District will vote in the Reading West and Mid Berkshire County Constituency at a General Election. The new Polling Station will be located at the Emmanuel Methodist Church Polling Place.
- 3.31. Please note the attached plan which shows the extent of the new Battle district BC edged red.



### **Norcot / Southcote ward boundary**

- 3.32. The Boundary between Norcot and Southcote wards was changed in the LGBCE review so that both sides of Cockney Hill and taking in housing south of Cockney Hill was moved into new Norcot ward district JA.
- 3.33. The housing affected which is located in Norcot ward district JA is as follows:
- a) Houses (even numbers) to the south of Cockney Hill
  - b) Cheddington Close
- 3.34. It is proposed to create an additional new Polling District JC and Polling Station in Norcot ward for the above properties which will vote in the new Reading Central Constituency at a General Election. The voters will vote at St Michaels Primary school as they do at a local election.
- 3.35. Please note the attached plan which shows the extent of the new Norcot district JC edged red.

### **Central Reading Constituency / Earley and Woodley Constituency**

#### **Redlands / Church ward boundary**

- 3.36. The southern boundary of Redlands ward and Northern boundary of Church ward were changed in the LGBCE review.
- 3.37. The changes in the LGBCE 2019/20 review to the Church/Redlands ward boundaries ensured that all university buildings and accommodation in the borough were kept within Redlands ward district LD.
- 3.38. The Housing affected that is located in Redlands ward district LD is as follows:
- a) Elmhurst Road (odd numbers 5 to 11)
  - b) Northcourt Avenue (even numbers 14 to 18, Creighton Court & St Patrick's Hall)
  - c) Sherfield Drive (Benyon Hall, Fickling Court, Sherfield Hall, The Cottages, The Farmhouse, The Granary, 1 to 4)
  - d) Shinfield Road - Mackinder Halls (Ashbury, Blewbury, Cholsey, Dunsden, Enborne, Fawley, Hurley, Ipsden) Newington Terrace, Oakley Terrace, Padworth House
  - e) Upper Redlands Road - Greenow House, McCombie House, Windsor Hall, Wardens House
- 3.39. It is proposed to retain the above properties in Polling District LD within Redlands ward which will vote in the new Earley and Woodley constituency at a General Election. It is also proposed to move odd numbers 1,3,5,7,9 Whitley Park Lane into district LD. Voters in Polling District LD will continue to vote at Park House, Windsor Lounge University of Reading.
- 3.40. As they are located in the Reading Central Constituency, Wantage Hall and St Georges Hall will be moved from Polling District LD into Polling District LA and will vote at the Museum of English Rural Life Polling Place.
- 3.41. Please note attached Plan which shows the extent of the revised district LD edged red.

#### **Polling Station Electorates**

- 3.42. Appendix B further includes details of the current electorate for each Polling District, broken down by absent (postal) voters and voters in person. This is relevant to the review because the Electoral Commission guidance is that Polling Stations should not have more than 2,250 electors who vote in person at the Polling Station.

- 3.43. Polling Places can host more than one Polling Station, and at the present time 19 (out of 54) do. One hosts 3 Polling Stations.

### **Consultation**

- 3.44. The results of the consultation exercise are set out in **Appendix A**. This presents the results of the consultation by ward in alphabetical order, with the respondents being categorised by the Polling District in which they live, and whether a member of the public, Polling Place, or election staff, or a Councillor or officer.
- 3.45. As mentioned above, seven responses were received through the consultation. Save for a positive response from Thameside Primary School no responses were received from the schools that I propose are retained as a Polling Place.

### **Emmer Green**

- 3.46. Two responses were received suggesting that addresses in the range 37-91 (odd numbers) Lowfield Road that are not in Polling District GB be transferred to that Polling District. This was to correct an anomaly which existed in 2022 whereby a small number of people are in a different Polling District from their immediate neighbours and have an unacceptably long journey to the Polling Station.
- 3.47. The register shows the anomaly was corrected in 2022 and that the properties in the range 37-91 Lowfield Road are all in Polling District GB.

### **Caversham**

- 3.48. A response was received on behalf of the Parish of Our Lady & St Anne's Church (the Church) in Caversham, which is located in Caversham Polling District CA. The response proposed the use of the Church as a Polling Place. The present Polling Place for Caversham Polling District CA is New Bridge Nursery School which is a double Polling Station.

### **Abbey**

- 3.49. A response was received on behalf of the Abbey ward councillors which concurred with the Returning Officers comments in Appendix B in respect of Polling Districts A, AC and AD.
- 3.50. With regard to the Polling Place for Polling District AB currently located at the Reading Central Library, which is to close at the end of 2024, this will require a replacement Polling Place from 2025.
- 3.51. Three alternative locations for a Polling Place were put forward as follows:
- a) Abbey Baptist Church Hall on Abbey Square, or
  - b) St Laurence Church, next to the Old Town Hall, or
  - c) The Soane Space in the Old Town Hall itself.
- 3.52. The three alternative locations have been inspected by the Deputy Returning Officer and a report has been produced to the Abbey ward Councillors for their consideration.
- 3.53. No comments were received about the Polling Places in the remaining wards

### **Use of Schools as Polling Stations**

- 3.54. Local authorities across the country use schools as Polling Places and have done so for generations. Schools which are maintained from public funds have a duty to make themselves available for use as Polling Places if required by the Returning Officer.
- 3.55. In Reading, 16 of our 54 Polling Places are schools (29%). Being a local Polling Station reinforces the school's position within its local community and brings local residents into the school to vote.

- 3.56. Of the 16 schools, 15 are Primary or Nursery schools. In many cases, nowadays the school will close and treat Polling Day as an inset day.
- 3.57. At election time, the Department for Education issues standard advice to schools that are used as Polling Places. Local authorities have the power to require a school to act as a Polling Station. The decision to close the school rests with the head teacher and will usually depend on whether arrangements can be made for voting to take place separately from the rest of the school premises, with a separate entrance and exit. If the school decides to close on polling day, it should try to make up the lost education by re-arranging the school calendar so that the school meets the requisite 190 days or holding a non-contact (“inset”) day on polling day so that teachers are present but not the pupils.
- 3.58. As can be seen above from para 3.25 seven schools are no longer used as Polling Stations as alternative arrangements were found. Common themes that have been expressed in the past over the use of schools as Polling Places were the inconvenience of childcare and the disruption to education. The latter will not arise if the school treats polling day as an inset day, as suggested by the Department of Education.
- 3.59. During the year preceding the consultation exercise, I received a complaint about the use of Southcote Primary School and Manor Primary School as Polling Places. I was not able to find a suitable alternative Polling Place. Interestingly, the consultation did not generate any negative comments about the use of Southcote Primary or Manor Primary School as Polling Places. In the local election in May 2023 and a bye election in August 2023 the staff common room at St Michael’s Primary School was used as a Polling Station. The staff common room is not considered suitable for a General Election which will require the use of the Main Hall as the Polling Station.
- 3.60. I have been in contact with the Director of Education before this formal Review to encourage all schools to contact me, before or during the formal review period, to discuss any concerns that they have about their participation as a Polling Place. None have done so.
- 3.61. After the conclusion of the consultation the Returning Officer was made aware of the proposed closure for refurbishment of the Reading Scout and Guide HQ during 2024 which means the premises will not be available from spring 2024 until January 2025. The temporary closure will require an alternative temporary Polling Station to be found.

#### **4. Contribution to Strategic Aims**

- 4.1. The Council’s new Corporate Plan has established three themes for the years 2022/25. These themes are:
- Healthy Environment
  - Thriving Communities
  - Inclusive Economy
- 4.2. These themes are underpinned by “Our Foundations” explaining the ways we work at the Council:
- People first
  - Digital transformation
  - Building self-reliance
  - Getting the best value
  - Collaborating with others
- 4.3. Full details of the Council’s Corporate Plan and the projects which will deliver these priorities are published on the [Council’s website](#). These priorities and the Corporate Plan demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.
- 4.4. The electoral registration process and elections support the promotion of the participation of Reading people in local democracy.

## **5. Environmental and Climate Implications**

- 5.1. The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 5.2. There are no climate related impacts arising from this report.

## **6. Community Engagement**

- 6.1. The arrangements for public consultation on the Review are set out in the main body of this report.
- 6.2. Consultation documents were sent to the following:

Community Centres, Leisure Centres, Libraries (including the coffee mornings at Reading Library), Pakistani Community Centre and Polish Club, Reading University, Hexagon, South Street Arts Centre, ACRE - Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality, Town Hall, Cllr Surgeries, Older People's Working Group, Carers Steering Group, Physical Disability and Sensory Needs Network, Adult Care User Panel and hard to reach groups - People over 85, Trans and non-binary people, disabled people, Ethnicities with low ID ownership, including people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

## **7. Equality Implications**

- 7.1. Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—
  - eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act
  - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
  - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- 7.2. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not relevant to the decision, but the following issues have been addressed as part of the Review.

### **Access**

- 7.3. A significant element of the review is to consider the suitability of the existing Polling Stations in terms of access. Section 16 of the 2006 Act has amended Section 18D of the 1983 Act to require the authority to take sufficient account of the accessibility of disabled persons to Polling Stations (S18(2)(b)).
- 7.4. In 2019 as part of the 2019 review the Council's Property service commissioned an access audit of our Polling Places, from Faithful and Gould, the Council's surveying consultants.
- 7.5. Disability audits of the Council's 54 Polling Places (75 Polling Stations) were undertaken in 2023 following the introduction of the provisions of the Elections Act 2022 and as part of this review by my Deputy Returning Officers. At each election, I ask Presiding Officers to report back on access issues in their Polling Stations; and my Deputy Returning Officers also look at access as part of their Polling Station inspections.
- 7.6. The Deputy Returning Officer attended the Council's Access Forum on 23 November 2023. He presented the Polling Districts and Polling Places review to the Forum and invited participating organisations to respond. The Council's Access Officer, Helen Bryant, did respond, and her comments are included in Appendix A, and are set out below:

**"When received insert details of HB response or minutes of the Access Forum meeting"**

- 7.7. In my view, all of the Polling Places we use are wheelchair accessible, either directly or through discrete arrangements made at the venue. However, in some cases, there can be a long distance from the road to the room used as the Polling Station.

### **Parking**

- 7.8. Many Polling Places, in particular in central Reading, have limited free parking for any voter. This extends to dedicated disabled parking spaces. However, drivers with a Blue Badge can park on double yellow lines if they display their badge and time. The most difficult Polling Places to access by car are Sir Herman Gollancz (Abbey Polling District A), and Newtown Primary School (Park Polling District K).
- 7.9. One response from the Access Forum commented on difficulties of getting to the Polling Places due to the state of the public highway. This is beyond the scope of this review.
- 7.10. As mentioned above, 16 of the Council's 54 Polling Places are schools (29%). Over the past decade, schools have reviewed and upgraded their security and safeguarding arrangements, including installing perimeter fencing and gates. This has had the intended effect of restricting public access, including in some cases vehicular access.

### **Public Transport**

- 7.11. Given the tight urban density of Reading Borough (4,040 hectares), no Polling Place is more than half a mile from a bus route, and most are located on routes.

## **8. Other Relevant Considerations**

- 8.1. Nothing further to note.

## **9. Legal Implications**

- 9.1. In exercising its powers, the Council is required to give all electors "such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances". In addition, in choosing Polling Places, only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled must be chosen so far as is reasonable and practicable.
- 9.2. The Returning Officer is required to provide a sufficient number of polling stations in each polling place and to allocate electors to the polling stations in such manner as he or she thinks most convenient. There are now a total of nearly 21,964 postal voters in local elections in Reading. The review should therefore focus on the remaining 95,377 electors who are not postal voters and will need to vote in person at their local polling station.
- 9.3. The Electoral Commission recommend that no polling station should have more than 2,250 electors in person per polling station (who are not postal voters); and 3 Poll Clerks if the number of electors in person was over 1,250. This is lower than the level set out in previous guidance but has been set to reflect the additional requirements of the Polling Station voting process, for both Polling Station staff and electors, as a result of the changes made by the Elections Act 2022 (Voter ID). The Electoral Commission also requests that Returning Officers bear in mind the predicted turnout per election type and staff their Polling Stations accordingly, bearing the above ratio in mind as guidance.

## **10. Financial Implications**

- 10.1. The 2023/24 budget for electoral registration is £394k, and the budget for local elections is £90k: the cost of the review has been met from within these resources.
- 10.2. The Council's spend on hiring its 54 polling places for each election is just over £26,500. The rates of hire vary between venues, in a range from £116 to £1,925. The average is £481.

## **11. Timetable for Implementation**

11.1. The changes recommended by this Review will take place from the next general Election. A new Register of Electors will be published on 1 March 2024 in readiness with these changes taken into account.

## **12. Background Papers**

12.1. There are none.

## **Appendices**

- 1. Consultation Responses**
- 2. Returning Officer Written Submissions**
- 3. Plan of Polling Districts**

