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# Report by the Returning Officer on the compulsory polling district and polling place review

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<b>Committee considering report:</b>	Extraordinary Council
<b>Date of Committee:</b>	20 February 2024
<b>Portfolio Member:</b>	Councillor Jeff Brooks
<b>Date Portfolio Member agreed report:</b>	18 January 2024
<b>Report Author:</b>	Clare Ockwell
<b>Forward Plan Ref:</b>	C4439

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## 1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Council for the parliamentary polling districts and polling places within West Berkshire.

## 2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That, in response to the Council's public consultation on the review of polling districts and polling places, the Council is asked to approve the recommendations set out in Appendix A.
- 2.3 That the existing polling districts remain unchanged with the following exceptions.
- 2.4 That polling places in polling districts Lambourn 2 (Lambourn Memorial Hall), Newbury 6/Greenham 3 (Newbury Rugby Club), Thatcham 3 (Thatcham Memorial Hall), Thatcham 7 and Thatcham 8 (Moorside Centre), and Purley-on-Thames (Purley Memorial Hall) are now subject to further review and will be agreed by the Returning Officer in time for elections to be held in spring 2024.
- 2.5 That the Returning Officer maintains delegated authority to agree any further changes to polling places.

## 3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	N/A

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<b>Human Resource:</b>	N/A			
<b>Legal:</b>	Under Section 18c of the Representation of the People Act 1983, a review of polling districts and polling places must take place at least every five years. The Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020 will extend the length of review to eight years, therefore the next review is due in 2031.			
<b>Risk Management:</b>	N/A			
<b>Property:</b>	N/A			
<b>Policy:</b>	N/A			
	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Commentary</b>
<b>Equalities Impact:</b>				
<b>A</b> Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		Y		
<b>B</b> Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		Y		
<b>Environmental Impact:</b>		N		
<b>Health Impact:</b>		N		

<b>ICT Impact:</b>		N		
<b>Digital Services Impact:</b>		N		
<b>Council Strategy Priorities:</b>		N		
<b>Core Business:</b>		N		
<b>Data Impact:</b>		N		
<b>Consultation and Engagement:</b>	Yes, a four week public consultation has been carried out with stakeholders, disability and community groups, other Returning Officers and political groups.			

## 4 Executive Summary

### Introduction

- 4.1 Following the recent amendments to Parliamentary boundaries, a review of the polling districts that make up the parliamentary constituencies must be carried out by each local authority. In some instances, the new constituency boundaries may cause authorities to split existing areas and polling districts or create new ones.
- 4.2 Polling Districts are geographical areas, based on parish boundaries. Some parishes are split into two or more polling districts to accommodate the district ward boundaries and parish council wards.
- 4.3 The polling district is where the voting takes place, and a polling station is the room within the polling place used for voting purposes.
- 4.4 A polling district should have reasonable facilities for voting, be convenient for voters, have good transport links, and be somewhere with community identity. No more than 2000 electors should be allocated to each polling station, therefore many polling places will have more than one polling station.
- 4.5 The Council is required to carry out a review of polling districts and polling places at least every five years in accordance with the Representation of the People Act 1983. The review period starts in October, but the authority can choose the exact dates and length of the review, however it must fall within a sixteen month period.
- 4.6 Parliamentary boundaries will be in place for the next parliamentary general election therefore it was prudent to start the review as soon as practicable after the 2 October 2023. Any constituency by-election run before the next parliamentary general election would be run on the former constituency boundaries, therefore the current electoral

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register published on the 1 December 2023 reflects the current polling districts and constituencies. Reference is however made to future parliamentary constituencies.

- 4.7 As a result of the parliamentary boundary review, West Berkshire will have two constituencies, a smaller Newbury County Constituency and a new Reading West and Mid Berkshire. The latter will take in three wards from Reading Borough Council, Norcot, Tilehurst and Kentwood.
- 4.8 The review commenced on the 14 November 2023.
- 4.9 A public consultation period started on the 14 November 2023, running until the 12 December 2023. During this time a questionnaire was made available online or in paper format, though any representation by letter or email was also accepted.
- 4.10 A 'live' document was maintained throughout the consultation period as required in legislation, allowing anyone with an interest in the review to see the comments made online. All responses are anonymous.
- 4.11 West Berkshire Council have gradually, over many years, stopped using schools as polling places. This prevents the closure of a school for all reserved polls. Schools could be closed at short notice should a snap parliamentary election be called.
- 4.12 Polling places/stations need to be accessible, where possible. As well as the buildings being Disability Discrimination Act (1999) compliant, consideration should be given to location, parking, transport routes, steep hills, rivers, main roads, railway lines and facilities for the election staff.
- 4.13 The polling place should be within the polling district, but in many cases, this is not possible due to a lack of community or publicly accessible facility within the parish area. In those instances, the electors are allocated a polling place in a neighbouring polling district. This location should be ideally in the same district ward and constituency to prevent confusion to polling staff and electors.
- 4.14 The recommendations should be in place prior to the Police and Crime Commissioner elections on the 2 May 2024 and possibly a general election if held before.
- 4.15 Maps of all polling districts and existing polling places/stations are available on the [West Berkshire Online Map](#) under the layer 'Administrative boundaries'.

## 5 Conclusion

- 5.1 A full table of responses to the consultation is attached, with recommendations.
- 5.2 In many cases, suggested alternative polling places are not within the designated polling district and therefore cannot be considered. In some cases, a school has been suggested.
- 5.3 The designation of polling districts and polling places is a function of the Council, whereas decisions about polling stations are for the Returning Officer. Due to the desirability of approving the polling places in a compacted timescale, possibly due to the loss of a building, fire, flood or other unforeseen circumstances, it is recommended that the authority continues to designate the polling place decisions within the polling

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district to the Returning Officer rather than Full Council. This is recommended under the powers stated in section 18 and 18b of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

- 5.4 A total of 167 responses were received. Many of the comments made are useful and have been included in the recommendations on the attached document (appendix A).
- 5.5 76% of respondents voted in a polling station for the local elections in May 2023. The remaining 24% did not, mostly because they use post or proxy votes or not voted at all.
- 5.6 87.32% of respondents thought their current polling station is in the correct location for their polling district.
- 5.7 97.16% of respondents believe the current polling station has reasonable facilities for voting.
- 5.8 17.14% of respondents have a disability, long term illness or health condition.
- 5.9 The Returning Officer is attempting to address concerns as to the suitability of polling places in Thatcham, Lambourn, and Purley-on-Thames. Contact has been made with several alternative locations and visits will be carried out in January 2024.
- 5.10 The polling district identification letters will be modified to reflect the changes to the parliamentary boundaries, removing the reference to Wokingham, whereby 'Y' precedes the parish code and changing identification of the Reading West (and Mid Berkshire) area, currently marked with a 'Z'.
- 5.11 An updated register of electors will be published on the 1 February 2024 to reflect the changes in 5.10.

## 6 Appendices

Appendix A – Final consultation document dated 19<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

Appendix B - Parliamentary constituency maps

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### Subject to Call-In:

Yes:  No:

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council                              | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position  | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Item is Urgent Key Decision   | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
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## Report by the Returning Officer on the compulsory polling district and polling place review

Report is to note only

**Wards affected:** all

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### Document Control

Document Ref:		Date Created:	
Version:		Date Modified:	
Author:			
Owning Service			

### Change History

Version	Date	Description	Change ID
1			
2			