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1. What is the difference between a polling district, a polling place and a polling station?

A polling district is a geographical sub-division of an electoral area, i.e. a UK Parliamentary constituency, a European Parliamentary electoral region, a ward or an electoral division.

A polling place is a geographical area in which a polling station is located. However, as there is no legal definition of what a polling place is the geographical area could be defined as tightly as a particular building or as widely as the entire polling district.

A polling station is the actual area where the process of voting takes place, and must be located within the polling place designated for the particular polling district.

2. Polling districts

2.1 Who is responsible for designating polling districts?

Every relevant authority in the UK is responsible for dividing its area into polling districts for UK Parliamentary elections for so much of any constituency as is situated in its area, and for keeping the polling districts under review.

For European Parliamentary elections, the same polling districts as designated for UK Parliamentary elections are to be used unless the relevant authority considers that there are special circumstances that make alternative designations appropriate.

For local government elections, a local authority may divide its designated electoral areas (i.e. wards or electoral divisions) into polling districts.

Although there is no requirement to sub-divide local government electoral areas into polling districts, it is recognised good practice to do so. When doing so, every effort must be made to ensure that the polling district scheme for local government elections mirrors as closely as possible that agreed for parliamentary elections.

2.2 What is the definition of a relevant authority?

a) In England, the council of a district or London borough;
b) In Scotland, a local authority; and
c) In Wales, the council of a county or county borough

2.3 What are the rules?

When designating polling districts, relevant authorities must seek to ensure that all the electors in the constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.

In addition, and unless there are special circumstances that lead the authority to determine otherwise, each parish in England and each community in Wales must be in a separate polling district.

Similarly in Scotland, each electoral ward must be divided into two or more separate polling districts.

2.4 What is the Electoral Registration Officer's responsibility?

Where a relevant authority makes any alterations to the polling districts within its area, the Electoral Registration Officer must amend his or her register of electors accordingly.

The changes to the register take effect on the date that the Electoral Registration Officer publishes a notice stating that the adaptations have been made.
It is recommended that alterations to polling districts be timed to coincide with the annual revision of the register of electors. This will help to avoid confusion both for electoral professionals and other recipients of the register.

However, there may be instances where alterations must be made at other times of the year.

3. **Polling Places**

3.1 **Who is responsible for designating polling places?**

Every relevant authority in the UK must designate a polling place for every polling district in the parliamentary constituency unless the size or other circumstances of the polling district are such that the situation of the polling station does not materially affect the convenience of the electorate.

The relevant authority must also keep the polling places under review.

3.2 **What are the rules?**

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.

In addition, the polling place for a polling district must be within the area of the district unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area either wholly or partly outside of the polling district.

The polling place must also be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the polling district how they will be able to reach their designated polling station.

Should a relevant authority fail to designate a polling place, the entire polling district will be classed as the polling place for that district.

4. **Polling Stations**

4.1 **Who is responsible for designating polling stations?**

The Returning Officer for the particular election must provide a sufficient number of polling stations, and allot the electors to those polling stations in such manner as he or she thinks the most convenient. They will take in to consideration any guidance provided by the Electoral Commission.

4.2 **What are the rules?**

Polling stations must be located within the polling places designated by the relevant authority.

In a UK Parliamentary constituency in Scotland that comprises the whole or any part of more than one local government area, there must be at least one polling station in each of those local government areas.

The election rules permit the Returning Officer to provide one or more polling stations within the same room, and must supply each with a sufficient number of voting compartments.

5. **Review of polling districts and polling places**

5.1 **General background**

Section 16 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced a number of changes to the Representation of the People Act 1983 in respect of the way in which reviews of polling districts and polling places must be undertaken.
5.2 Reviews

Following the first review which took place in 2011, the relevant authority must then complete a further review of every polling district and polling place before the end of the period of four years starting with the completion of the previous review.

It is important to note that if it wishes to do so, the relevant authority may undertake reviews of all or some of the designated polling districts and polling places at any time, but must undertake a review of each within four years of the previous review.

For administrative convenience, it would seem sensible to review all polling districts and polling places on a regular four-yearly cycle, regardless of whether or not a particular polling district or polling place has been reviewed for some reason e.g. because of an influx of electors in an area or the non availability of a building designated as a polling place in the intervening period.

This will help in ensuring that a consistent approach is taken across the relevant authority’s area.

5.3 The role of the Returning Officer

The relevant authority is required to consult the Returning Officer for every parliamentary election held in a constituency that is wholly or partly within its area.

The Returning Officer is required to make representations to the relevant authority, which must include information as to the location of polling stations (both existing and proposed) within polling places (both existing and proposed).

Within thirty calendar days of their receipt, the relevant authority is required to publish the Returning Officer's representations as a minimum:

- at the relevant authority’s office;
- at least one other conspicuous place in the area; and
- on the relevant authority’s website

6. Other representations

In reviewing polling places, the relevant authority is required to actively seek representations from such persons as it thinks have particular expertise in relation to:

- access to premises; or
- facilities for persons who have different forms of disability

Such persons must be given the opportunity to make representations and to comment on the representations made by the Returning Officer.

7. Evaluating the suitability of potential polling places

Regardless of the expert advice the relevant authority is required to seek, it is important that the accessibility needs of all voters are considered when designating polling places.

There are a number of steps that can be taken to facilitate this process:

Consider the location of the polling place:

- is it located close to where most of the electors in the polling district live?
- is it at the top or bottom of a steep hill?
- does it have suitable access from a road?
if there is a pavement, does it have a dropped kerb close by?
• are there any convenient public transport links?

Availability of parking:
• are there adequate parking facilities close to the entrance of the building?
• If not, is there anywhere close by that could be used for parking just on polling day?
• how far do electors have to walk from the car park to the polling station?
• is there a designated disabled parking space, or could one be provided?
• is there a dropped kerb from the parking area to the polling station?

All approaches should:

• have a hard, smooth, non slip surface, without steps, potholes, broken slabs, etc. – graveled surfaces can present difficulties to wheelchair and buggy users;
• not have any severe gradients; and
• be well lit.

Entrance:

• does the building have a level entrance?
• are there any steps to the entrance of the building?
• are the stairs highlighted in any way?
• is there a handrail by the steps?
• is a permanent ramp provided?
• if not, could a temporary ramp with a suitable gradient be provided safely, or is there another entrance which people with disabilities or other electors could use?
• is the door wide enough for a wheelchair user to gain access?
• how heavy are the doors for a frail or elderly person to open? Would they need to be propped open?

Inside the building:

• are there any internal steps or barriers for electors to negotiate?
• are the door mats level with the floor? If not, can they be removed?
• are there any other trip hazards?
• is there a suitable non-slip floor covering? Would it become slippery when wet?
• are there any corridors which may be difficult to negotiate for any electors using wheelchairs or those who find walking difficult?
• in terms of the layout of polling equipment in the room to be used as a polling station, is there enough space in the room for staff, polling equipment and a number of electors, including a wheelchair user?
• is there adequate lighting in the room? Switch on all the lights available to test this;
• is there any need for additional lighting?
• movable mats, heavy curtains trailing on the floor, a mix of carpet and wooden flooring with edging lips in between, and highly polished floors can all be potential hazards.

If the premises has any of these features, can anything be done to remove or improve them?

Another key factor to consider when assessing the suitability of a particular building or location is the facilities available to polling station staff.
It must not be overlooked that staff will be on duty for approximately sixteen hours, and not permitted to leave the premises. Their basic human needs must not be discounted.

Issues to consider include the provision of:

- adequate toilet facilities;
- a kitchen, or at a minimum, access to tea and coffee making facilities;
- adequate heating/cooling;
- a separate area adjacent to the polling station where breaks could potentially be taken;
- a telephone;
- comfortable adult chairs.

8. **Completion of the review**

On completion of a review, the relevant authority is required to give reasons for its decisions in respect of the designation of both polling districts and polling places

In addition, the authority must publish:

- all correspondence sent to a Returning Officer in connection with the review, and
- all correspondence sent to any person whom the authority thinks has particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability;
- all representations made by any person in connection with the review;
- the minutes of any meetings held by the authority where details of the review have been considered;
- details of the actual designations of polling districts and polling places agreed as a result of the review; and
- Details of where the results of the review have been published.

Schedule A1 does not specify in what manner the relevant authority is required to publish this notice, but it would seem reasonable to follow the principles set out in the Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Parliamentary Elections) Regulations 2006 for the publication of a Returning Officer’s representations.

9. **The role of the Electoral Commission**

The Electoral Commission has no role in the review process itself, although guidance has been issued to assist relevant authorities in the administration of the reviews.

However, the Commission has an extremely important role in respect of considering representations and observations made that a relevant authority has not conducted a review so as to:

- meet the reasonable requirements of the electors in the constituency, or a body of them (i.e. the reasonable requirements of a particular area of the authority have not been satisfactorily met); or
- take sufficient account of the accessibility to disabled persons of polling stations within a designated polling place

9.1 **Who may make representation to the Electoral Commission?**

Section 18D (1) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 sets out who may make representations to the Electoral Commission, namely:
- in England, any parish council which is wholly or partly situated within the constituency (or parish meeting where there is no such council);
- in Wales, any community council which is wholly or partly situated within the constituency;
- not less than thirty registered electors in the constituency (although electors registered anonymously cannot make such a representation);
- any person (except the Returning Officer) who made representations to the authority when the review was being undertaken; and
- any person who is not an elector in a constituency in the authority’s area who the Commission feels has sufficient interest in the accessibility of disabled persons to polling places in the area or has particular expertise in relation to the access to premises or facilities of disabled persons.

In addition, the Returning Officer may make observations on any representations made to the Commission.

### 9.2 Review held by the Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is required to consider any such representations and observations, and after doing so, may direct the relevant authority to make any alterations it sees necessary to the polling places designated by the review.

Should an authority fail to make the alterations within two months of the direction being given, the Commission may make the alterations itself.

### 10. Non-compliance

It is important to note that the outcome of an election cannot be questioned simply because a relevant authority, an Electoral Registration Officer, a Returning Officer or the Electoral Commission fails to comply with any or all aspects of a review process.
Appendix A

Extract from the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as inserted by Section 16 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006)

18A - Polling districts at parliamentary elections

(1) Every constituency is to be divided into polling districts.
(2) A relevant authority must—
   (a) divide its area into polling districts for the purpose of parliamentary elections for so much of any constituency as is situated in its area, and
   (b) keep the polling districts under review.
(3) The following rules apply—
   (a) the authority must seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in its area have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances;
   (b) in England, each parish is to be a separate polling district;
   (c) in Wales, each community is to be a separate polling district;
   (d) in Scotland, each electoral ward (within the meaning of section 1 of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004) is to be divided into two or more separate polling districts.
(4) Subsection (3) (b) to (d) does not apply if, in any case, there are special circumstances.
(5) If an alteration of polling districts in an area is made under this section—
   (a) the registration officer who acts for the area must make such adaptations of his register of parliamentary electors as are necessary to take account of the alteration, and
   (b) the alteration is effective on the date on which the registration officer publishes a notice stating that the adaptations have been made by him.

18B Polling places at parliamentary elections

(1) A polling place is to be designated for each polling district in a constituency.
(2) But subsection (1) does not apply if the size or other circumstances of a polling district are such that the situation of the polling stations does not materially affect the convenience of the electors or any body of them.
(3) A relevant authority must—
   (a) designate the polling places for the polling districts in its area, and
   (b) keep the polling places in its area under review.
(4) The following rules apply—
   (a) the authority must seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in its area have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances;
   (b) the authority must seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place for which it is responsible is accessible to electors who are disabled;
   (c) the authority must have regard to the accessibility to disabled persons of potential polling stations in any place which it is considering designating as a polling place or the designation of which as a polling place it is reviewing;
   (d) the polling place for a polling district must be an area in the district, unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the district;
   (e) the polling place for a polling district must be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the district how they will be able to reach the polling station.
(5) If no polling place is designated for a polling district the polling district is to be taken to be the polling place.

18C Review of polling districts and places

(1) Each relevant authority must complete a review under sections 18A and 18B of all of the polling districts and polling places in its area before the end of the period of 12 months starting with the date on which section 16 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 comes into force.
(2) Subsection (1) does not apply in the case of a polling district or polling place (as the case may be) which is designated for the first time during that period.
(3) In such a case, the first review of the polling district or polling place must be completed before the end of the period of four years starting with the date on which that designation is made.
The authority must complete a further review of each polling district and polling place in its area before the end of the period of four years starting with the completion of the previous such review.

Subsections (1) to (4) do not prevent a relevant authority carrying out at any time a review of a particular polling district or polling place.

Schedule A1 has effect in relation to a review.

18D Review of polling districts and places: representations to Electoral Commission

(1) This section applies if in relation to a constituency in the area of a relevant authority a relevant representation is made to the Electoral Commission by—

(a) an interested authority in England and Wales;
(b) not less than 30 electors in the constituency;
(c) a person (other than the returning officer) who has made representations under Schedule A1;
(d) a person who is not an elector in a constituency in the authority’s area but who the Commission think has sufficient interest in the accessibility of disabled persons to polling places in the area or has particular expertise in relation to the access to premises or facilities of disabled persons.

(2) A relevant representation is a representation that a review under section 18A or 18B has not been conducted by a relevant authority so as to—

(a) Meet the reasonable requirements of the electors in the constituency or any body of those electors, or
(b) Take sufficient account of the accessibility to disabled persons of polling stations within a designated polling place.

(3) The returning officer for the constituency may make observations on representations made under this section.

(4) The Electoral Commission must consider such representations and observations and may if they think fit—

(a) Direct the relevant authority to make any alterations to the polling places designated by the review which the Commission thinks necessary in the circumstances;
(b) If the authority fails to make the alterations before the end of the period of two months starting on the day the direction is given, make the alterations themselves.

(5) Alterations made by the Electoral Commission under subsection (4) have effect as if they had been made by the relevant authority.

(6) An interested authority in relation to a constituency in England and Wales is -

(a) In England, the council of a parish, or where there is no such council the parish meeting of a parish, which is wholly or partly situated within the constituency;
(b) In Wales, the council of a community which is so situated.

(7) The reference in subsection (1) (b) to electors does not include persons who have an anonymous entry in the register of parliamentary electors or local government electors.

18E Sections 18A to 18D: supplemental

(1) This section applies for the purposes of sections 18A to 18D.

(2) No election is to be questioned by reason of -

(a) any non-compliance with the provisions of those sections, or
(b) any informality relative to polling districts or polling places.

(3) Each of the following is a relevant authority -

(a) in relation to England, the council of a district or London borough;
(b) in relation to Scotland, a local authority;
(c) in relation to Wales, the council of a county or county borough.

(4) The following do not apply to Northern Ireland -

(a) section 18A (2) to (5);
(b) section 18B (2) to (5);
(c) sections 18C and 18D,

and in Northern Ireland the polling districts and polling places are those for the time being established under the law relating to local elections within the meaning of section 130 of the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962.

SCHEDULE A1 (Section 18C)

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES

(1) The relevant authority must publish notice of the holding of a review.
The authority must consult the returning officer for every parliamentary election held in a constituency which is wholly or partly in its area.

(3) (1) every such returning officer must make representations to the authority.
   (2) The representations must include information as to the location of polling stations (existing or proposed) within polling places (existing or proposed).
   (3) The representations must be published in such manner as is prescribed.

(4) (1) The authority must seek representations from such persons as it thinks have particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability.
   (2) Such persons must have an opportunity -
      (a) To make representations;
      (b) To comment on the returning officer’s representations.

(5) Any elector in a constituency situated in whole or in part in the authority’s area may make representations.

(6) Representations made by any person in connection with a review of polling places may include proposals for specified alternative polling places.

(7) On completion of a review the authority must -
   (a) Give reasons for its decisions in the review;
   (b) Publish such other information as is prescribed.
Appendix B

Extract from Statutory Instrument 2006 No. 2965


Citation, commencement and extent

1. These Regulations may be cited as the Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Parliamentary Elections) Regulations 2006 and shall come into force on 1 January 2007.

2. These Regulations extend to England and Wales and Scotland only.

Manner of publication of representations

3. A relevant authority must, within 30 days of receipt, publish representations made by a returning officer for the purposes of the review of polling districts or polling places -
(a) by posting a copy of them at its office and in at least one conspicuous place in their area; and
(b) if the authority maintains a website, by placing a copy on the authority's website.

Information to be published on completion of a review

4. On completion of a review the authority must publish the following -
(a) all correspondence sent to a returning officer in connection with the review;
(b) all correspondence sent to any person whom the authority thinks has particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability;
(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;
(f) details of the places where the results of the review have been published.