

The Association of Electoral Administrators

Policy Position Paper – Provision of polling districts and polling places

Great Britain only

1. Introduction

This paper outlines the AEA's views of, and highlights issues related to, the provision of polling districts and polling stations.

2. Legislative Background

2.1 Polling districts¹

Across the three nations of Great Britain, particular local authorities are responsible for dividing their area into polling districts for UK parliamentary elections:

England: the council of each district or London borough

Scotland: each local authority

Wales: each county or county borough

This responsibility also applies to any sections of a parliamentary constituency situated in the local authority area, and those districts must be kept under review.

Local authorities must develop a polling district scheme which aims to give all electors reasonable facilities for voting as wherever possible, taking local circumstances into account.

Each parish (in England) and each community (in Wales) should be a separate polling district unless there are special circumstances.

In Scotland, each electoral ward must be divided into two or more polling districts unless there are special circumstances.

2.2 Polling places²

Section 18B of the Representation of the People Act (RPA) 1983 requires a polling place to be designated for each polling district in a constituency.

A polling place may be a school or an area like a village green where a mobile polling station can be installed.

As with polling districts, it is the local authority's duty to designate polling places for the polling districts and to keep them under review.

The local authority must designate places that are accessible to electors with disabilities whenever it is reasonable and possible. However, the authority must consider the needs of all electors and should not designate a place so far away from most electors in the polling district that it is inconvenient for them to reach it.

¹ Sec 18A to 18E RPA 1983

² Secs 18A to 18E RPA 1983

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The polling place for any polling district must, except in special circumstances, be an area in that district. Some authorities designate the entire polling district as the polling place. However, Section 18B(4)(e) of the RPA 1983 states that 'the polling place must be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the district how they will be able to reach the polling station'. It is therefore recommended that polling places should be defined more specifically than by the name of the polling district - for example, by designating the name of the polling place (normally a building or area and its surroundings).

2.3 Polling stations³

The returning officer (RO) decides on the provision of polling stations for an election and will allot electors to them in the most convenient way. However, the polling station allotted to electors from any polling district must be in the polling place for that polling district. One or more polling stations may be situated in the same room.

2.4 Review of polling districts and places⁴

Every local authority must carry out a full review of all polling districts and polling places every five years, within a designated 16-month period. The next review runs from 1 October 2023 and must be completed by 31 January 2025.

This does not prevent a local authority from carrying out a review at any time.

A local authority must publish a notice of the review and must seek representations from any people/bodies with expertise or an interest in how people with different forms of disability can access premises or facilities.

The next UK Parliamentary general election is scheduled to take place in May 2024, the review of the parliamentary constituency boundaries report is due in Spring 2023 and the next polling district and polling places review must conclude by January 2025. It would seem sensible for the review to conclude in the January before the election, not afterwards. This would ensure that the election is run with recently reviewed polling districts and polling places, ensuring any issues have been addressed and new boundaries incorporated.

3. Key Issues

3.1 Timetable for review of polling district and polling places

The last UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places review had to be started and completed between 1 October 2018 and 31 January 2020. In our UK Parliamentary general election (UKPGE) [post-election statement](#), we highlighted that administering two unscheduled elections in 2019 had a significant impact on review timetables. Legislation prevented the deadline being extended. This introduced unnecessary risk to delivering the UKPGE and the review as administrators balanced conflicting priorities. We have made the following recommendation to the UK Government:

We believe that the UK Government should introduce changes to legislation so that, in the event of an unscheduled UK national poll or referendum, local authorities may extend their polling district and polling places review.

³ Rule 25 PER; Rule 20 PAR 2006; Rule 20 PCR 2006; Rule 24 GLCR 2007; Rule 25 GLLR; Rule 24 GLMR; Rule 25 GLLR; Rule 26 PCCEO 2012

⁴ Sec 18C RPA 1983

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We also believe that the timing of the review should enable alternations to be made ahead of the next UKPGE. The next scheduled review potentially includes the 2024 UKPGE in the middle of the 16-month period. This is not helpful for electoral administrators or the electorate. We would urge the UK Government to consider aligning reviews with both the parliamentary boundary review and UKPGE election cycle.

3.2 Designation of polling district and polling places

As outlined in previous post-election reports, we have concerns that the current system allows for political motivations to influence democratic processes. In our [2017 post-election report](#), and in subsequent reports, we have made the following recommendation to the UK Government:

EROs [Electoral Registration Officers] should be given responsibility for the sub-division of UK parliamentary constituencies into polling districts, and ROs for the designation of polling places within those districts.

4. AEA Policy Position

- Legislation should be introduced so that, in the event of an unscheduled UK national poll or referendum, local authorities may extend their polling districts and polling places review.
- The timing of reviews should be re-aligned with the boundary review cycle and the UKPGE election cycle.
- Instead of councillors in local authorities, EROs should be given responsibility for the sub-division of UK parliamentary constituencies into polling districts, and ROs for the designation of polling places.

5. Further Information

The Association of Electoral Administrators was founded in 1987 and is the professional body representing the interests of electoral administrators in the United Kingdom. We are a non-governmental and non-partisan body with just under 2,000 members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services. Eleven regional branches of the Association cover the United Kingdom.

Further details on the legislative background connected to this policy position are available on request.

If you require any additional information, please contact Angela Holden, AEA Policy Manager – angela.holden@aea-elections.co.uk or 07752 630497.

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