

# City of Edinburgh Council

10.00am, Thursday, 21 March 2024

## Revised Polling Places for the next UK Parliamentary General Election

Executive/routine  
Wards

All

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 This report asks Council to delegate authority to the Chief Executive to make minor amendments to the polling arrangements for the next UK Parliamentary General Election, where venues are unavailable at short notice, with changes made following consultation with ward councillors.

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## Revised Polling Places for the next UK Parliamentary General Election

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 This report asks that Council delegate authority to the Chief Executive to amend polling arrangements for the next UK Parliamentary General Election. The election may be called with a minimum of 25 working days' notice. Many of the polling places previously designated and agreed by Council are private venues that may be unavailable at such short notice. There will be insufficient time in the election timetable to allow Council to agree new polling places. Any changes will be made following consultation with ward councillors.

### 3. Background

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- 3.1 On 4 February 2021 Council approved polling arrangements for the City of Edinburgh which followed a statutory review of polling districts and polling places in the city.
- 3.2 That set of polling places was used for polling at the May 2021 Scottish Parliamentary election in the six constituencies in Edinburgh. This included 19 primary schools.
- 3.3 On 10 February 2022 Council approved amendments to these arrangements to eliminate the use of schools as polling places, preventing further disruption to education. Those changes applied to the polls held on 5 May 2022 for elections to the City of Edinburgh Council.
- 3.4 A UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) is likely to be held during 2024. The election timetable is set in Schedule 1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, with the election 25 working days after the dissolution of Parliament.
- 3.5 Some designated polling places may not be available at such short notice given that most are not Council owned and may be prebooked; others may be temporarily out of service.

## 4. Main report

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- 4.1 Local authorities have a duty to divide their area into polling districts and to designate a polling place for each district. The aim is to ensure the optimal facilities for voting in terms of location, accessibility and capacity of the building, to support turnout in electoral events. Arrangements should support participation in the political process.
- 4.2 A full statutory review of polling arrangements was undertaken during 2020, including public consultation, with proposals informed by the experience of the delivery of recent elections. Consultees included Elected Members, MP's, MSP's, Community Councils, local disability groups and parent councils in schools.
- 4.3 Proposals were agreed by Council on 4 February 2021 with amendments agreed on 10 February 2022 which eliminated the use of all schools as polling places.
- 4.4 While some use is made of council facilities including libraries, area offices and community centres, most of the polling venues are now private buildings, including hotels, social clubs, sports clubs and churches. Some of these venues are booked in advance for events that cannot be cancelled. Others are out of commission for limited periods due to building work.
- 4.5 A UKPGE can be called at short notice with the day of poll 25 working days after the dissolution of Parliament. A set of designated polling places needs to be clear at that point which can be communicated to voters on their poll cards so that voters attend to cast their vote.
- 4.6 While it is the duty of the Council to designate polling places there may be a need to revise polling arrangements where designated places are unavailable at short notice. Given the timetable as set out in Schedule 1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, there would be insufficient time for revisions to be agreed by Council. It is therefore proposed that the Council grants delegated authority to the Chief Executive to revise polling arrangements as necessary ahead of any poll where venues are unavailable. This would include the designation of polling places and minor changes to polling districts.
- 4.7 For any replacement polling places identified, ward councillors will be consulted for their local knowledge. The focus will always be to ensure that there are optimum facilities available to support polling and promote turnout, with polling places well located, accessible and with adequate capacity. Given the previous decisions of Council no schools will be considered as potential venues for polling.
- 4.8 The UK Elections Act 2022 made changes to the help available to people voting in a polling station. These changes will apply to UK Parliamentary General Elections and by-elections. Returning Officers need to take all reasonable steps to provide support for disabled voters at polling stations. All polling places are surveyed to ensure that they are safe and accessible venues with support options considered for voters with disabilities.

- 4.9 Section 18(c) of the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended, places a duty on local authorities to review the UK parliamentary polling districts, polling places and polling stations in their area on a regular basis every fifth year. A full statutory review of polling arrangements for the City of Edinburgh Council area with public consultation will be undertaken following the forthcoming UK Parliamentary General Election, with changes to apply for polls for the Scottish Parliament Election on 7 May 2026.

## **5. Next Steps**

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- 5.1 Given the likelihood of a short notice UKPGE the Election Team are keeping all polling facilities under review to ensure that there is full availability.
- 5.2 Council is asked to give delegated authority to the Chief Executive to make amendments to polling arrangements for future polls where the availability of venues is affected by other loss of premises for example from building works or bookings that cannot be moved. This will allow changes to be made quickly given that the tight timescale for the election would make a decision of Council impractical.

## **6. Financial impact**

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- 6.1 There may be a small increase in hire costs for venues resulting from the proposals contained in this report, where venues need to be hired at short notice to replace those which are temporarily unavailable.
- 6.2 All costs of polling are met by the UK Government for all Parliamentary elections and the Scottish Government for Scottish Parliament elections. The Council must meet the costs for local government elections.

## **7. Equality and Poverty Impact**

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- 7.1 Every voter has the right to vote independently and in secret. Under the Equality Act 2010, Returning Offices have had a duty to anticipate the needs of disabled voters and make reasonable adjustments to remove substantial disadvantage for those voters. This means they must take steps to understand and anticipate on an ongoing basis the needs of disabled voters – with different types of disability, support and access requirements within their area so that they can make informed decisions about how best to meet these needs by making reasonable adjustments, including providing appropriate equipment and support. This includes the selection of polling venues to ensure accessibility.
- 7.2 There are specific provisions in the Representation of the People Act 1983 which support the accessibility of elections for disabled voters. Under Schedule A1 of the Act the council must consider the accessibility of potential polling stations when

considering designating or reviewing a polling place. The council must also seek representations from those who have a particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability.

- 7.3 Changes may need to be made at very short notice given the limits for the election timetable and there will be limited scope for such consultation. However, the priority remains to ensure that there are optimum facilities available to support polling and promote turnout, with polling places well located, accessible and with adequate capacity. These principles will be considered for all revisions to venues. For all new polling places identified, ward councillors will be consulted.

## **8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications**

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- 8.1 Not applicable

## **9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact**

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- 9.1 The delivery of elections is a major corporate project for the Council and remains on the Corporate Risk Register. The Electoral Commission noted in their September 2023 report that significant changes to the process of voting added a new layer of complexity and risk to an already stretched process and that the capacity and resilience of election teams across the UK remain a significant concern.
- 9.2 A documented project management approach is applied to each election with a tailored project plan, regular highlight reports, a risk register and contingency planning.
- 9.3 The Electoral Commission provide Performance Standards for Returning Officers which are outcome focussed and assist in the planning of each election.

## **10. Background reading/external references**

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- 10.1 The background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) which were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report are:
- 10.1.1 [Schedule A1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983.](#)
- 10.1.2 [Electoral Commission Guidance – Reviews of polling districts, polling places and polling stations](#)
- 10.1.3 [Report to Council 4 February 2021 - The Designation of New Polling Places as a result of a Statutory Review of Polling Places and Polling Districts](#)
- 10.1.4 [Report to Council 10 February 2022 - Revised Polling Places for the City of Edinburgh Council Election on 5 May 2022 to eliminate the use of schools](#)

## 11. Appendices

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None