

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

15 December 2011

Agenda Item	
Report No	

Highland Council Elections - Thursday 3 May 2012

Report by the Returning Officer

SUMMARY

The purpose of this Report is to advise the Council of the impact that Election Administration for the forthcoming Highland Council Elections, on Thursday 3rd May 2012, will have on the work of the Council and explain the statutory framework that governs the conduct at this election.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Highland Council, at its Meeting on 15 March 1996, appointed the Chief Executive as Returning Officer for Highland Council Elections. The last two Highland Council election cycles were combined with those of the Scottish Parliament. Following the Gould Report in 2007, the Scottish Government passed the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2009, separating these elections and establishing the election date on 3 May 2012.
- 1.2 The Primary Election Legislation governing the conduct of an election is the Representation of the People Act 1983, which has been amended from time to time over the years, most recently by the Electoral Administration Act 2006 and the Local Electoral Administration and Registration Services (Scotland) Act 2006. The secondary legislation governing the running of the 2012 election – the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Order 2011 – was passed by the Scottish Parliament on 15 November 2011.
- 1.3 Section 25(2) of the 1983 Act states that “....a Council shall place at the disposal of the Returning Officer for the purposes of assisting the Returning Officer in the discharge of any functions conferred on him in relation to a parliamentary election, the services of officers employed by the Council”
- 1.4 This Report aims to outline the staffing requirements to ensure the smooth administration of the forthcoming Highland Council Election.

2. GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

- 2.1 Nearly all Council Services assist, in a variety of ways, with Election administration. Most of the administration work is undertaken by Officers in the Chief Executive's Service with assistance from other services as and when required. In the past this has worked well, principally due to the co-operation of Service Directors.

3. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

- 3.1 It is proposed to make the following arrangements for the administration and running of the Highland Council Election and the Council is asked to agree to the proposed staffing arrangements and use of accommodation as set out below.
- 3.2 The Returning Officer has overall responsibility for the conduct of the Election. Michelle Morris, Assistant Chief Executive will be appointed as Senior Depute Returning Officer.
- 3.3 It is intended to appoint John Bruce, Elections Manager and William Gilfillan, Corporate Manager, as Depute Returning Officers with responsibility for ensuring the smooth administration of the Election functions. Carron McDiarmid, Head of Policy and Performance, will be appointed as a Depute Returning Officer to undertake Postal Vote Personal Identifier Administration using computerised checking.
- 3.4 An Election Administration Team comprising of the Elections Manager, Election Officer and two Business Support staff will be established at Headquarters to process the nominations received (arrangements will be made for obtaining Nomination Papers and depositing them locally), draft ballot papers and to provide administration training, advice, guidance and support in relation to all aspects of the Local Government Elections for Highland Council. .
- 3.5 This will minimise the disruption to other staffs' workload until closer to the election date.
- 3.6 A Postal Ballot Team will be established at Headquarters to process and check postal ballots received. It is estimated that some 27,000 postal ballots will be issued across all 22 Wards.
- 3.7 The Scottish Ministers have a Framework Agreement in place to deliver electronic counting of the votes at the next Local Government Elections. As part of the Agreement, the Council has entered into a User Agreement with Logica and Scottish Ministers to deliver the electronic counting of ballot papers at this election. As a consequence, there will be one Count Centre for Highland next year.

- 3.8 There will be a need to recruit and train staff (from across all services of the Council) to run the count. It is anticipated that the number of staff involved at the Count will be no more than 60. However, as part of the electronic count contract, there will be training sessions, probably in Edinburgh, for the full Count team during April 2012 and staff will also need to be released from their normal duties for that training.
- 3.9 Council staff are the backbone of conducting the polls and the counts at an election. Experienced staff are used to manage the teams at the counts and to organise the logistics of filling and distributing ballot boxes, training poll and counting staff, transporting and handling ballot boxes at the counts. In the days immediately preceding the poll and counts these staff are deployed on election duties rather than their normal Council work. Without the co-operation of the Council and these staff, it would be impossible to conduct elections properly and efficiently.

4. ACCOMMODATION

- 4.1 Accommodation will be required for the Election Team outlined above. For past elections Committee Room 3 has been used as the Election Office. It is requested that the Council makes this accommodation available for the forthcoming election from Monday 16th January until the end of May 2012. The early start will also help facilitate the administration of the Crofting Commission Elections being held in March 2012.
- 4.2 Committee Rooms 1 and 2 in Headquarters will be required by the Postal Vote Team, during the period 18 April until 4 May 2012.

5. POLLING AND COUNTING STAFF

- 5.1 A considerable proportion of the 600 Poll Staff employed at a Council Election are members of staff of the Council. Staff are generally free to volunteer for election duties, but do require the approval of their line manager to ensure that adequate cover is available to keep the Council functioning. This voluntary arrangement has worked successfully in the past and again it is requested that the Council agrees to continue with these arrangements.

6. POLLING STATIONS

- 6.1 It is the Council's role to designate Polling Districts and Polling Stations and there is in existence a current scheme of Polling Districts. This Scheme will be used in the 2012 elections, subject to any local changes that require to be made. The Council has delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Convener, Leader of the Council's Administration, Group Leaders and appropriate Local Members, to make any necessary changes to the Scheme should circumstances arise prior to the election.

7. COUNT VENUE

7.1 As in 2007, the ballot papers at this election will be counted electronically. The Count will take place at the Sports Centre, Inverness on Friday 4th May 2012.

8. ELECTION COSTS

8.1 The Council will need to budget for expenditure of £350,000 in 2012/13 to meet the Council's share of election costs.

9. RECOMMENDATION

9.1 It is recommended that the Council agrees the resources required by the Returning Officer to run the Local Government Election 2012 for Highland Council.

Signature: _____

Designation: Returning Officer

Date: 7 December 2011

Author: John Bruce, Elections Manager

Background Papers:

This Report does not rely, to any material extent, on any particular document