

Agenda Item	
Report No	

UK Parliamentary Election: Report to the Highland Council

Report by the Returning Officer

SUMMARY

The purpose of this Report is to advise the Council of the impact that Election Administration has on the work of the Council and of the statutory framework that governs the conduct of an election. The report is brought forward at this time given that the next UK Parliamentary Election may be held at any time before 3 June 2010 and the lead time necessary to prepare for elections.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Highland Council, at its Meeting on 15th March 1996, appointed the Chief Executive as Returning Officer for Highland Council Elections. As a consequence of this, he also became the Returning Officer for the three Westminster Parliamentary Constituencies within the Highland Council Area, these being Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross; Ross, Skye and Lochaber, and Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey.
- 1.2 The Primary Election Legislation governing the conduct of a parliamentary election is the Representation of the People Act 1983, which has been amended from time to time over the years.
- 1.3 Section 25(2) of that 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 and other arrangements to ensure the smooth administration of the forthcoming Parliamentary Election.

2.0 GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

- 2.1 Nearly all Council Services assist, in a variety of ways, with Parliamentary Election administration. Most of the administration work is undertaken by staff of the Chief Executive's Service, who call in assistance from other services as and when required.

3.0 ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

- 3.1 It is proposed to make the following arrangements for the administration and running of the next UK Parliamentary Election and the Council is asked to agree to the proposed staffing arrangements and use of accommodation set out below.
- 3.2 As Returning Officer, the Chief Executive has overall responsibility for the conduct of the Election. The Assistant Chief Executive, will be appointed as Senior Depute.
- 3.3 The Elections Manager will also be a Depute Returning Officer with responsibility for ensuring the effective administration of the Election function across the three Parliamentary Constituencies.
- 3.4 The Corporate Manager, Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross, will be appointed as a Depute Returning Officer and will undertake all administration in the Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross Constituency. Election Administration will be carried out from Wick.
- 3.5 The Corporate Manager, Ross, Skye & Lochaber will be appointed as a Depute Returning Officer in respect of Ross, Skye & Lochaber Constituency.
- 3.6 The Corporate Manager, Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey, will be appointed as a Depute Returning Officer in respect of the Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey Constituency.
- 3.7 Each of the Corporate Managers have been asked to establish Election Teams to run the election in their Constituency. There is a considerable training need to highlight the specialist nature of election administration and the new postal ballot procedures.
- 3.8 In order to minimise disruption to Council work, it is proposed to make the preparatory arrangements of updating documentation, checking the availability of polling stations, checking and replacing election equipment and checking the availability of polling and count staff using the Elections Manager and an Administrative Assistant, Ross, Skye & Lochaber to carry

out such duties for all three constituencies. This will minimise the disruption to other staffs' workloads until closer to the election date.

- 3.9 Other experienced Council staff are the backbone of conducting the polls and the counts at an election and these 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.

4.0 ACCOMMODATION

- 4.1 The Returning Officer does not have dedicated office accommodation within Council buildings. In the 12 weeks preceding the election and two weeks after the election, it is intended to establish a core Election Team in Council Headquarters to co-ordinate the election and accommodation will be required. For past elections Committee Room 3 has been used as the Election Office. It is requested that the Council makes this accommodation available when the date of the election is known, or Monday 15 February 2010, whichever is the later.
- 4.2 At this election, there is an obligation to check Postal Voters' Personal Identifiers (PVPIs - Signatures and Dates of Birth) of the 20,000 postal voters across Highland. For security reasons, the Council is asked to make available Committee Rooms 1 & 2 at Council Headquarters as and when the rooms are required. Postal Voting at Headquarters will be managed by the Corporate Manager, Ross, Skye & Lochaber, supported by a Committee Administrator, and other staff, yet to be selected.
- 4.3 PVPI checking and the opening of postal votes for the Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross Constituency will be carried out in the Assembly Rooms, Wick .

5.0 ELECTION ACCOUNTS

- 5.1 At previous elections, it has been the responsibility of each Depute Returning Officer to prepare Parliamentary Election Accounts in the year following the Election. This is an onerous and time consuming task, given the accounting system imposed by the Scotland Office. The final accounts will be prepared by Accountants within the Finance Service. The Director of Finance has agreed to this course of action.

6.0 POLLING AND COUNTING STAFF

- 6.1 A considerable proportion of the 660 Poll Staff 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 proposed that the Council agrees to continue with these arrangements.
- 6.2 Council staff also make up the majority of the 300 + Counting staff employed at the election. Whilst the counts take place overnight, the geography of the Highlands means that the counts are not completed until sometime between 2.30am and 4.30am. It has been practice to allow staff to take an additional half day's paid leave on the morning after an election if the staff have been involved in a count. It is proposed that the Council agrees with the continuation of this practice.

7.0 POLLING STATIONS

- 7.1 It is the Council's responsibility to designate polling stations and a current scheme of polling stations is in place. The Corporate Managers will review whether any changes are needed to the current polling stations and also whether there are any problems of access and suitability of polling stations for people with disabilities which can be tackled prior to the election. It is intended to submit a Report on the Scheme of Polling Districts and Polling Places to a future Meeting of the Council.

8.0 COUNT VENUES

- 8.1 The Counts have normally been held in the Assembly Rooms, Wick; the Dingwall Leisure Centre; and the Inverness Sports Centre. It is proposed to continue with these arrangements. However, a review of the location of the Count for the Ross, Skye and Lochaber Constituency is being undertaken.

9.0 ELECTION COSTS

- 9.1 Any direct costs incurred by the Council on Parliamentary Election material, such as postages, photocopying, rental of office accommodation etc can be recovered from the Returning Officer. Staff costs are not presently recoverable.

10. RECOMMENDATION

10.1 It is recommended that the Council agrees the proposals for the conduct of the UK Parliamentary elections.

Signature:

Designation: Returning Officer

Date: 28 August 2009

Background Papers :-

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