

# THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

8<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2007

Agenda Item	
Report No	

## ELECTIONS 2007: PUBLIC AWARENESS

### Report by the Returning Officer

#### Summary

The Report advises the Council of the Public Awareness Initiative being carried out in the run up to the May 2007 Elections.

#### 1 Background

- 1.1 The combined Scottish Parliamentary and local government Elections are being held on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2007. The Elections introduce a new voting system for the local government elections and new ballot papers for the Scottish Parliamentary elections.
- 1.2 Responsibility for informing the public about the forthcoming elections and the voting systems in use lies with the Electoral Commission for the Scottish Parliament elections and the Scottish Executive for the Local Government elections. As both elections will take place on the same day, the Electoral Commission and the Scottish Executive have come together to develop a joint public awareness campaign called VoteScotland. Legislation has also recently placed a duty on Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers to promote participation in elections.
- 1.3 There are several dimensions to public awareness about the electoral system and promoting participation in elections:
  - Ensuring that voters are registered on the electoral roll;
  - Awareness raising of the importance of voting and of the electoral system
  - Encouraging candidates to stand for election
  - Specific information about when, where and how to vote
  - Arrangements for voters who need assistance to cast their votes.

#### 2 Voter Registration

- 2.1 The Electoral Registration Officer has responsibility for registration matters. This year, in addition to the normal postal canvas, the Electoral Registration Officer has carried out a door to door canvas. This has resulted in an increase of 3,600 voters on the Electoral Roll. We have also seen a rise in the number of voters who have registered for a postal vote. In 2003 there were 6,300 postal votes issued. At this point there are already 15,000 voters registered for a postal vote. A further change is that with the introduction of a rolling register, voters will be able to register up to 18<sup>th</sup> April 2007.

## 2.2 There are also national campaigns promoting voter registration:

- The Electoral Commission will be conducting a specific campaign from 19th March “2007 UK Registration Week” to encourage voters to register to vote before 18th April 2007. This is a UK wide campaign which will also be targeted at the local press.
- VoteScotland is targeting information at under-registered groups including young people, some Black and Minority Ethnic communities and people who have recently moved home.
- Vote Scotland is also running a campaign reminding citizens of other EU member states resident in Scotland that they are entitled to vote in both the Scottish Parliament and local government elections.
- A specific campaign will be around the Chinese New Year on 18th February targeted at the Chinese community who are under registered.

## 3 Awareness Raising

3.1 The VoteScotland campaign has also been making use of the national and local media to cascade electoral information to the Scottish public. The public relations campaign has been running since September 2006 and activities have included a photocall with the Party leaders in the Scottish Parliament alongside an initiative with local press to highlight the important role that Councillors undertake in their communities. As the elections approach, the campaign will aim to raise awareness of the 3 May elections and provide information about the electoral systems, and will continue to direct people to the [www.votescotland.com](http://www.votescotland.com) website, which will grow to include interactive games and other content.

3.2 The full campaign will be launched on 3rd March 2007 with two months to go to the election. Several events around both rural and urban areas of Scotland will be held on that day to maximise interest for local press. Others include:

- “Launch of mock elections” in Schools in February, run by the Hansard Society to give both primary and secondary pupils the opportunity to participate in, and learn about, elections. This also has general awareness raising benefits with parents.
- “Take your parent to the poll”, launched on 2 April. Recent legislative changes mean that it is now legal for young people to go into the polling booth with their parents.. The concept would be launched by a national news release calling on schools and young people to become involved in the run up to the elections. This would be followed up by tailored local news releases.

3.3 At the end of February, every household in the Highland Council area will receive a leaflet, produced by VoteScotland, accompanying Council Tax notifications, explaining the voting systems.

3.4 The Highland Council website now has links to votescotland and contains a new “frequently asked questions” section about elections. The emphasis will shift to specific information about voting closer to the election.

## 4 Encouraging Candidates to Stand for Election

4.1 Changes to members remuneration have been designed to make becoming an elected member more attractive to a wider range of people. As Returning Officer I have taken the view that my focus should be on awareness raising and specific information and help for

voters. I believe that it is more appropriate for national bodies or political parties to be involved in encouraging candidates to stand for election. It is, of course, open to the council to take a different view and I would be happy to act on this.

4.2 For the avoidance of doubt, I and my staff will always assist prospective candidates and candidates on electoral matters to the best of our abilities.

5. **Specific information about voting**

5.1 The formal notice of election will be accompanied by a newspaper supplement in all the local newspapers which will set out detailed information about the contests, candidates and voting. This information will also be available on the Council's website, in libraries and in service points and a specific election telephone hot line will be set up which allows voters to ask specific questions about the elections.

5.2 Further detailed campaigns are being developed by the Electoral Commission, VoteScotland and the Electoral Reform Society and together with other returning officers, I am in discussion with these organisations about how their campaigns can be given local content and used in the Highlands.

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**Assistance to Voters.**

6.2 It is anticipated that some voters may need advice and assistance in the polling station. Specific training will be provided to Presiding Officers and Polling Clerks on the questions and issues that voters may raise. Specific provision has been made to have clearly set out posters in all polling stations giving guidance on the completion of ballot papers. In addition, up to 100 extra staff will be engaged as Information Officers in busier polling stations to explain the voting process to any voter who requires it.

2.5 Specific provision will also be available for voters with mobility problems or visual impairments.

**3.0 Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Council notes the Public Awareness Initiatives being carried out in the run up to the May 2007 Elections

Signature: 

Designation: Returning Officer

Date: 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2007

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Background Papers:

