

# THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

19 DECEMBER 2013

Agenda Item	21
Report No	HC/61/13

## Election Administration 2014

### 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 European Parliamentary Election and the Scottish Independence Referendum will have on the operation of the Council. The European Parliamentary Election will be held on Thursday 22 May 2014, with the Referendum on Thursday 18 September 2014. The Report explains the statutory framework that governs the conduct of the election and referendum. The report also comments on the need to have the election administration arrangements in place from January to October 2014.

#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Highland Council, at its Meeting on 15 March 1996, appointed the Chief Executive as Returning Officer for Highland Council Elections. As a consequence of this, the Returning Officer automatically becomes the Local Returning Officer for the European Parliamentary Election. It is expected that I will be appointed as the Counting Officer for Highland in the Referendum.
- 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 and Registration Act 2013. The secondary legislation governing the running of the 2014 election – the European Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Regulations 2013 – will pass through the Westminster Parliament in November 2013. The Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013 passed through the Scottish Parliament in November 2013 and has received Royal Assent .
- 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 my staffing requirements to ensure the smooth administration of the forthcoming Parliamentary Election and Referendum.

## **2.0 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 Chief Executive's Services, 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.
- 2.2 In general, the European Parliamentary Election and the Referendum will be administered in the same way, with only a few technical differences between them.
- 2.3 The European Parliamentary Election will be run under the direction of the Regional Returning Officer for Scotland, Mary Pitcaithly, Convener of the Elections Management Board for Scotland. The Referendum will be run under the direction of the Chief Counting Officer, who is also likely to be Mary Pitcaithly. It is proposed to use the May 2014 election as a template for the practices and procedures to be used at the referendum, which will clearly have a much higher media profile.

## **3.0 ELECTION ADMINISTRATION**

- 3.1 I propose to make the following arrangements for the administration and running of the Election / Referendum and would ask the Council to agree to the proposed staffing arrangements and use of accommodation set out below.
- 3.2 As Local Returning / Counting Officer, I have overall responsibility for the conduct of the Election. Michelle Morris, Assistant Chief Executive will be appointed as my Depute.
- 3.3 I also intend to appoint John Bruce, Elections Manager and William Gilfillan, Corporate Manager, as Depute Returning / Counting Officers. They will be responsible for ensuring the smooth administration of the Election functions. Carron McDiarmid, Head of Policy and Performance, will be appointed as a Depute Returning / Counting Officer to undertake Postal Vote Personal Identifier Administration using the computerised checking system.
- 3.4 I propose to establish a core team at Headquarters to administer the election. Election Administration training, advice, guidance and support will be provided by the HQ Election Team.

- 3.5 In order to minimise disruption to Council work, I propose to make the preparatory arrangements of updating documentation, checking the availability of polling stations, checking and replacing election equipment, checking the availability of polling and count staff and planning of the counting of the votes using the Elections Manager, Election Officer and two Business Support staff to carry out such duties pan Highland. This will minimise the disruption to other staffs' workload until closer to the election date. There will be a satellite election office based in Wick, comprising the well established Election Team in that Office.
- 3.6 For the Parliamentary Election, a Postal Ballot Team will be established in suitable, secure accommodation in Dingwall to process and check the postal ballots received. It is estimated that some 30,000 postal ballots will be issued. A pool of approximately 30 staff from across all services of the Council will be required to carry out these tasks during the period 12 – 23 May 2014, inclusive
- 3.7 For the Referendum, it is proposed that the Postal Ballot Team are again based in Dingwall, during the period 8 – 19 September 2014
- 3.8 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 ACCOMODATION**

- 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. I would request that the Council makes this accommodation available for the forthcoming election and referendum from Monday 27 January until Friday 10 October 2014.

#### **5.0 POLLING AND COUNTING STAFF**

- 5.1 A considerable proportion of the 600 Poll Staff employed by me at a combined Parliamentary and 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 I would hope that the Council would agree to continue with these arrangements.

## **6.0 POLLING PLACES**

- 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 2014 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 the appropriate Local Members, to make any necessary changes to the Scheme should circumstances arise prior to the election.
- 6.2 The number of Polling Stations to be used at the Election / Referendum will differ and will depend on whether any Directions are issued by the Regional Returning Officer or the Chief Counting Officer.

## **7.0 COUNT VENUE**

- 7.1 The European Parliamentary Election is a rather unique event, in that the counting of the votes cannot take place until after the close of all polling stations across Europe. Accordingly, **COUNTING** of the votes cannot begin until after 21.00 hrs on Sunday 25 May 2014. The result has to be announced by the local authority area and therefore there will be a single count site, located at the Highland Football Academy, Dingwall.
- 7.2 Once the counting of the votes has concluded, the result is transmitted to the Regional Returning Officer in Edinburgh who will collate and announce the Scotland Result.
- 7.3 The processes and procedure to be adopted at the Parliamentary Count will be a template for the systems to be used at the Referendum. It is anticipated that a Direction will be issued by the Chief Counting Officer, requiring the Referendum Result to be declared overnight, with the Highland result being transmitted to Edinburgh for inclusion in the National Result.

## **8.0 ELECTION COSTS**

- 8.1 The Scotland Office will meet the whole cost of the election, with costs incurred reimbursed through the European Parliamentary Election Charges' Order 2013. The Scottish Government will meet the cost of the Referendum, through a Referendum Charges' Order.

**9. RECOMMENDATION**

9.1 It is recommended that the Council notes and approves the administrative arrangements in this report.

Signature:

Designation: Returning Officer

Date: 11 December 2013

Author: John Bruce, Elections Manager

Background Papers:– This Report does not rely, to any material extent, on any particular document