

The Highland Council

15 December 2016

Agenda Item	16
Report No	HC/57/16

Local Government Elections to Highland Council - Thursday 4 May 2017

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 4 May 2017, 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 Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2009, separated these elections from combined elections with the Scottish Parliament and stated that the next ordinary election after 2012 shall take place in 2017 establishing the election date of Thursday 4 May 2017
- 1.2 The primary 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 Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015 has also allowed 16 and 17 year olds to take part in the 2017 Local Government Elections. The Scottish Local Government Elections Order 2011 has been amended to take account of the age change.
- 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 Corporate Development Services with assistance from colleagues in 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 Chief Executive in his capacity as Returning Officer has overall responsibility for the conduct of the Election. Michelle Morris, The Depute Chief Executive will be appointed as Senior Depute Returning Officer.
- 3.3 It is intended to appoint David Sutherland, Elections Manager, Stewart Fraser, Head of Corporate Governance, Cheryl MacIver Election Officer and Linda Johnstone ICT Service and Performance Manager as Depute Returning Officers with responsibility for ensuring the smooth administration of the Election functions. Robbie Bain, Ward Manager, 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 2.5 FTE Business Support staff will be established at Headquarters and Caithness House Wick. Arrangements will be made for obtaining Nomination Papers and depositing them locally using Ward Managers and other senior staff. The Election Team will also be responsible for drafting ballot papers and providing administration training, advice, guidance and support in relation to all aspects of the Local Government Elections for Highland Council. This will minimise the disruption to other staffs' workload until closer to the election date.
- 3.5 A Postal Ballot Team will be established at Council Offices, Dingwall to process and check postal ballots received. It is estimated that some 36,000 postal ballots will be issued across all 21 Wards.
- 3.6 The Scottish Government 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 CGI and Scottish Government to deliver the electronic counting of ballot papers at this election. As a consequence, there will be one Count Centre for Highland next year located in the Sports Centre in Inverness Leisure. The layout and arrangements will be similar to the count held in 2012.
- 3.7 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 for the full Count team in Aberdeen, shared with other Councils and arranged by the Scottish Government, during

February 2017. Staff will need to be released from their normal duties for that training. Additional staff will be required for a short period on the morning of the count to assist with ballot box opening.

- 3.8 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 9 January until the end of May 2017.
- 4.2 Committee Room 1 and 2 in Council Offices, Dingwall will be required by the Postal Vote Team, during the period 17 April until 5 May 2017. Other rooms in the Area Offices will be booked to facilitate the nomination process.

5. Polling and Counting Staff

- 5.1 A considerable proportion of the 596 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 amended to take account of boundary changes for the 2017 elections, subject to any local changes that require to be made.
- 6.2 The Returning Officer is embarking on a Polling Station Review with the intention of utilising Schools throughout Highland where ever possible. To support this Director of Care and Learning will schedule a staff "in service training day" in all Highland schools on the day of poll for all fixed term elections where the dates are well-known in advance. This includes elections to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the Highland Council. Aligning an existing in service training day with the day of poll will reduce the cost of the hire of polling places and minimise any disruption to pupils' education.

6.3 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 2012, the ballot papers at this election will be counted electronically. The Count will take place in the Sports Hall Inverness Leisure Centre Bught Lane, Inverness on Friday 5 May 2017.

8. Implications

8.1 The total cost of running the 2017 elections is estimated to be £550,000 although £144, 000 will be recovered from the Scottish Government to cover the equipment and software used in the electronic count.

The Council will need to budget for expenditure of £406,000 in 2017/18 to meet the Council's share of election costs. The Election Team will work with our Finance Team to identify areas of saving and will review this figure ahead of the May 2017 election.

8.2 The Scottish Elections (Dates) Act 2016 has set that that next Local Government Election after 2017 will take place in 2022. The Council will need to budget for a similar sum in that year plus an allowance for inflation.

8.3 Legal Implications – The Council will meet all its statutory requirements.

8.4 There are no known specific equality; climate change/carbon clever; rural; risk or Gaelic implications arising from this Report.

9. Recommendation

9.1 It is recommended that the Council agrees the resources required by the Returning Officer to run the Local Government Election 2017 for Highland Council.

9.2 It is recommended that the Council agrees to budget for the election in 2022 for a sum to be advised by the Director of Finance.

Designation: Returning Officer.

Date:

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