

Agenda Item	12
Report No	CPE 26/13

Highland Elections – Encouraging Participation / Increasing Turnout

Report by the Chief Executive

SUMMARY

This report provides Members with an up-date of the actions to encourage participation in elections, particularly for young people.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Committee held on 6 December, 2012 an Action Plan for encouraging participation in elections was agreed. This Report advises the Committee for the work undertaken by the Election Team and the development of a number of work streams.
- 1.2 The Work Plan listing the Election Team’s key activities during 2013 / 14 forms the Appendix to this Report.
- 1.3 It will be helpful to Members to understand the context in which this work is being carried out. The (likely) schedule of Statutory Elections between now and the next Highland Council Election is as follows:-

Date	Election Type
22 May 2014	European Parliamentary
18 September 2014	Scottish Referendum
19 March 2015	Cairngorm National Park
7 May 2015	United Kingdom Parliamentary
5 May 2016	Scottish Parliamentary
17 March 2017	Crofting Commission
4 May 2017	Highland Council Election

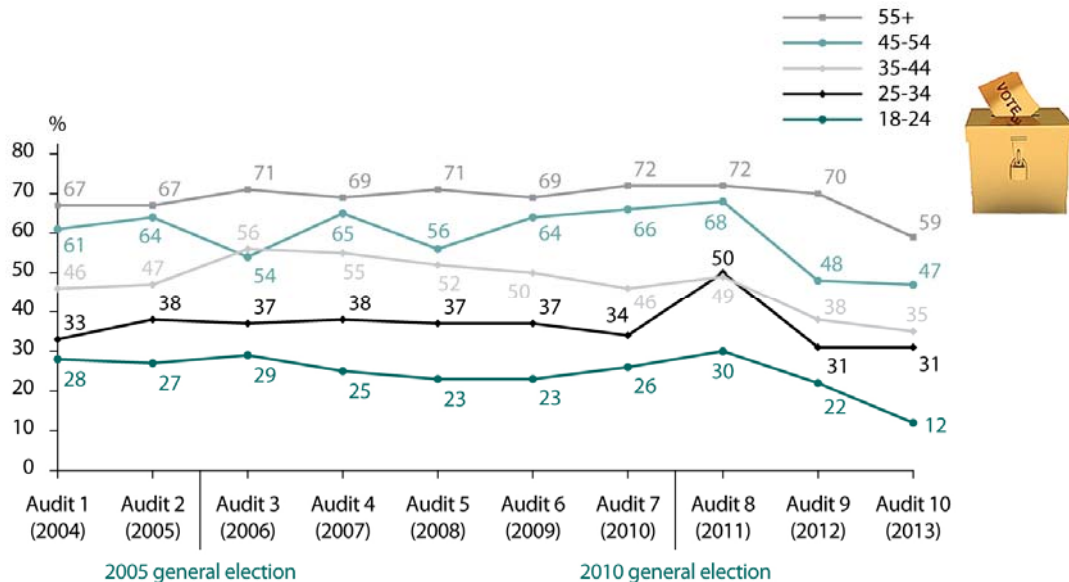
2.0 HANSARD SOCIETY: AUDIT OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

- 2.1 For the last 10 years, the Hansard Society (an independent, non-partisan political research and education organisation) has carried out an audit of political engagement across the United Kingdom. Its 10th Report, published in May 2013, provides a guide to underlying trends across the decade. In regard to

- Only 41% now say that in the event of an immediate general election they would be certain to vote compared to 48% who said the same last year.
- The number of people certain to vote has now declined 17 percentage points in just two years and is 10 percentage points lower than it was a decade ago at the start of the Audit series.
- 20% of the population now say they are 'absolutely certain not to vote', four percentage points higher than last year and double the number who said the same in Audit 8.
- 58% are still not prepared to vote even when they feel strongly about something.
- Only 12% of 18-24 year olds say they are absolutely certain to vote, a decline of 10 percentage points in a year, and a decline from the 30% who said the same in Audit 8.
- No more than six in 10 of the supporters of the three main political parties are certain to vote in the event of an immediate general election.

2.2 The Audit commented that “The proportions who feel certain to vote in the event of an immediate general election have always been high amongst older members of the public, and lower amongst successive age bands, as follows:-

Certain to vote



From Audit of Political Engagement 10. Reprinted with permission of the Hansard Society (www.hansardsociety.org.uk)

2.3 It is clear from the above table that the importance of ensuring that participation in elections forms an integral part of the Secondary School curriculum and is widely promoted within UHI sites in Highland.

3.0 LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

3.1 The Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Regeneration Committee is investigating a number of matters relating to the 2012 Scottish local government elections, with a view to making recommendations for improvement or change to the Scottish Government.

3.2 The matters being investigated are:

- ▶ Voter Turnout and how this can be increased
- ▶ Voter Registration and how this can be increased
- ▶ Proxy Voting including postal voting
- ▶ The Terminology used in and around elections
- ▶ Reasons why people do not vote
- ▶ Robson Rotation in respect of the ordering of the ballot paper
- ▶ Diversity amongst voters and elected representatives including any matters associated with the eligibility to stand, donations and the nomination process
- ▶ The timing of future elections with a view to minimising clashes.

3.3 The Committee reporters have now reported back to the Committee with its findings. The details of the report have not yet been made publicly available.

3.4 It is clear that the Parliamentary Committee's investigations will have a considerable influence on the work of the Councils, the Returning Officers and the Electoral Registration service/office in encouraging participation in electoral events in Scotland.

4.0 MOCK ELECTION

4.1 The Elections Team proposed running a mock European Parliamentary Election in one secondary school on election day on Thursday 22 May 2014. The Democracy in Schools Working Group considered the proposal and have suggested that, in 2014, the conflicting messages would be sent out. In that year, 16 and 17 year olds in the Highlands will be encouraged to register to vote in the Referendum. Those school pupils will in May 2014 be immersed in examinations and would not be involved in the lessons / preparation leading up to the mock election.

4.2 It was considered better that a mock election be held in, say, November 2014, when all school pupils would be able to participate. The Election

Team and the Youth Development Team will assist the school with the election procedures and the setting up of polling stations.

5.0 HIGHLAND YOUTH VOICE

5.1 The Election Team has met with the Executive Committee of Highland Youth Voice in March 2013. The purpose of the meeting was to engage young people by discussing a number of initiatives to encourage voting and participation in the democratic process.

5.2 The key themes that emerged included:

- Better links with schools on the curriculum for excellence i.e. teachers to cover specified election topics in subjects such as English and Mathematics;
- Mock Elections to be run in schools with polling stations set up;
- Election promotional materials to be handed out in schools i.e. stationery etc;
- A video of the democratic process to be shown in schools;
- Awareness adverts to be used on Facebook to encourage people to complete online forms for registering to vote or to click a box for an application form that could be posted out from the Electoral Registration Office;
- Local newspapers to produce articles on the democratic process and forewarn people about forthcoming elections;
- Local Councillors to have better contact with schools to apprise them of the democracy process.

5.3 The Election Team intends to further explore the above themes at the next HYV Conference at Badaguish in November 2013.

5.4 The HYV group indicated that Political Parties needed to be more proactive to help and inform voters in choosing who they could vote for.

6.0 UNIVERSITY OF THE HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS

6.1 UHI Student Council is being consulted on encouraging participation in elections. The Election Team met with the Student Council on Friday, 9 March 2013 to discuss a number of initiatives to encourage voting and participation in the democratic process.

- 6.2 The first focus group was held in Thurso on 2 May 2013.
- 6.3 UHI have agreed to work with the Election Team to encourage Students to vote by assisting in the following: -
- Including electoral registration forms in student induction packs
 - Sending out election contact details in student newsletters and emails
 - Displaying relevant posters in Colleges
 - Having face to face contact with the students on the democratic processes by continuing engaging with focus groups
 - Elections Office supplying promotional materials which are to be handed out with the election contact details i.e. canvas tote bags

7.0 DEMOCRACY AMBASSADORS

- 7.1 During discussions with the UHI Student Council / Focus groups and the Highland Youth Voice, it became clear that there was a need to ensure that information on the importance of registering to vote and thereafter encouraging electors to vote, has to have a greater focus. The suggestion of having “Democracy Ambassadors” on each school and UHI site across Highland seems eminently sensible. In schools, the HYV representatives could fulfil the role and Student Council representatives could carry out the role at UHI sites. Training of the Ambassadors would be carried out by Election Office / ERO staff, with Youth Development Officers from Highlife Highland supporting the HYV representative.

8.0 THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

- 8.1 The Electoral Commission regularly provides resources to support public awareness work on encouraging voter registration and providing information on elections. These resources – available on the Commission’s website - for use by electoral administrators and communication teams – include advertising templates, press releases and practical materials to encourage public participation in the electoral process. The Council has used, and does intend to use, the Commission’s resources, particularly in regard to poll staff training.
- 8.2 In 2014, it is intended that the Commission will have a statutory role in promoting awareness and understanding in Scotland about the Referendum; the referendum question and voting in the referendum.

9.0 LANDWARD CAITHNESS BY- ELECTION: 2 MAY 2013

9.1 Over recent years, there have been a number of by-elections. It is generally accepted that the turnout at a by-election is a reasonable indicator of the electorate's interest in democracy in the area. Before Landward Caithness the three earlier by-elections were

Wick – in person turnout of	28.96%
Tain and Easter Ross –	40.88%
Inverness South –	30.39

9.2 The overall turnout at the Landward Caithness by-election was recorded at 28.85%. This comprised a 50.2% return in Postal Votes and an average turnout of 20.6% in person across the 14 polling stations. However, turnout at the Polling Station at the Assembly Rooms, Wick (C04J) hit a new low of 10.1% turnout (11 electors out of 109).

10. UNDERSTANDING TURN-OUT IN ELECTIONS IN RURAL AREAS

10.1 A research project will begin this year and run to 2015 into understanding the dynamics of political engagement in rural communities. The aim of the research is to test the theory that people living in poverty are also politically poor, focusing on a large rural area of Scotland. The project is being undertaken by the Head of Policy and Performance as part of a research degree with the University of Bristol. Taking a case study approach and adopting a human rights framework the working title is 'Diminishing citizenship? Exploring the relationship between democratic participation and poverty in the Scottish Highlands'.

10.2 Currently, the objectives of the research are:

- to describe any patterns of consistently low turnout in Polling Districts in the Highlands;
- to test the strength of associations between low turnout, under-registration for voting and deprivation;
- to identify if there are any gender or age patterns of non-voters in the areas of low turnout (data permitting);
- to listen to the views of people living in areas of low turnout on their reasons for participating or not in the political process and to see if these are consistent with other studies done at a national level, or whether there are different experiences in the Highlands;
- to describe how barriers to participation can be challenged or removed, providing an agenda for action.

10.3 Briefings on the findings over the next two years will be provided to members for information.

11. SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM: REGISTRATION ISSUES

- 11.1 The Scottish Independence Franchise Bill is currently before the Scottish Parliament and is scheduled to be passed by the end of June 2013. The Bill proposes the creation of a Young Persons Register and prescribes the form to be used in relation to the registration of young voters. Electoral Registration Officers intend to request the school rolls of all eligible pupils who would qualify under the Referendum legislation and pre-populate them onto the young persons' form, when issued for this year's canvass in October. However the full detail of the Registration process (including following up non-responders) will be finalised once the legislation is enacted.

12.0 IMPLICATIONS

12.1 Resource Implications

There are will be specific resource implications arising from this report, but the additional work involved will be met from the existing Election team resources.

12.2 Financial Implications

There are no specific financial implications arising from this report. Elements of the Election Participation Programme will be funded from the Elections Budget. The financial implications will be reported to a future meeting of the Committee for consideration.

12.3 Legal Implications

There are specific legal implications arising from this report, in that the Council will be required to 'carry out and complete' reviews of polling districts and places in the period of 16 months beginning with 1st October 2013.

12.4 Equality Implications.

The focus on young people is an attempt to address the issue of low participation among this age group in the electoral process. In the focus groups and in the research project issues of gender are also being addressed.

12.5 Climate Change Implications

There are no specific Climate Change Implications arising from this report.

13. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 13.1 It is recommended that the Committee notes initiatives being carried out in partnership with Highlife Highland; Highland Youth Voice and UHI and agrees to deferring a Mock Election in a Secondary School until November 2014.

Signature:

Designation: Chief Executive

Date: 05 June 2013

Author: John Bruce, Elections Manager

Background Papers:–

Scottish Parliament Local Government and Regeneration Committee Papers
<http://tiny.cc/3y85ww>

Scottish Parliament Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee Papers
<http://tiny.cc/cw85ww>

Hansard Society: Audit of Political Engagement 10
<http://tiny.cc/dx85ww>

Encouraging Participation Work Plan

Timeline	Event	Aims and Objectives of the activity	Action	Done (✓)	By Whom
January – March 2013	Lesson Plan for schools	Identify the opportunity for increasing voter turnout for young people through the implementation of a Curriculum For Excellence in schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Further discussion to be carried out with the Education Working Group.</i> • <i>Report circulated on 21 March 2013 at CPE Meeting, explaining what was contained in the Curriculum for Excellence and what the current position in Schools was for dealing with democracy.</i> • <i>Target school leavers and those on activity agreements.</i> 	✓	Educ Working Group Head of Education Services Educ Working Group
1 February 2013 / 14	Promote Voter Registration	Discussions to take place on the options for increasing voter turnout with young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Create a Mobile app.</i> • <i>Set up information stands at local events: ie Black Isle Show.</i> • <i>Insert advertisements in RCFC and ICTFC Football programmes and ask for announcements to be made at half-time intervals.</i> • <i>Include registration forms in student induction packs and display posters in and around colleges.</i> • <i>Include election contact details in college newsletters.</i> 	✓	ERO / Head of Policy/ Election Office

20 February 2013	Democracy in Schools Working Group	<p>Consider the existing election process for young people and investigate an improved method of delivering them.</p> <p>Investigate the available educational democracy resources for incorporating into a range of curriculum subjects in the academic year leading up to elections.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Invite pupils to view chambers and take part in discussions/debates.</i> • <i>Debating groups developed to compliment democracy themes.</i> • <i>Run a pilot democracy based curriculum in one school around the suggested mock election in 2013/14.</i> • <i>Elections team continue to contribute to one HYV Exec and conference for the foreseeable future.</i> 	✓	Education/ Election Office
9 March 2013	Highland Youth Voice Executive Committee (Millburn Hostel, Inverness)	Plan to engage young people by discussing a number of initiatives to encourage voting and participation in the democratic process.	<p><i>Discussed democracy issues with HYV and it was agreed that the following incentives would be worthwhile: -</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Better link in with schools on the curriculum for excellence ie teachers to cover specified election topics in subjects like English and Maths;</i> • <i>Mock Elections to be run in schools with polling stations set up;</i> • <i>Election promotional materials to be handed out in school's;</i> • <i>A video of the democratic process to be shown in school's;</i> • <i>Awareness adverts to be used on Facebook to encourage people to complete online forms for registering to vote or to click a box for an application form that could be posted out from the Electoral Registration Office;</i> 	✓	YDO's / Election Office

2 May 2013	Student Focus Group (Thurso College)	Report on why they do / do not vote	<p><i>Discussed the following key elements with a group of students: -</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Why Vote</i> ○ <i>Who can Vote</i> ○ <i>How to Vote</i> <p><i>Agreed the following incentives : -</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Internet or text voting would encourage more people to vote;</i> • <i>Broadcasts on the Council's Web-site with Candidates;</i> • <i>Personal statements to be included so that electors know who they are voting for;</i> • <i>More information required on what each party represents.</i> 	✓	UHI/ Election Office
9 May 2013	Democracy in Schools Working Group	Plan to look at how to make the election processes more manageable in the schools and how the Council's election team can help facilitate elections round all the schools in 2014.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Prepare a democracy pack for schools and other youth organisations.</i> • <i>Recruit HYV representatives to fulfil the role as democracy ambassadors. This role would entail engaging with peer groups on the importance of voting and how to vote.</i> • <i>Run a mock European Parliamentary Election in one secondary school in November 2014.</i> 	✓	

21 June 2013	Highland Youth Voice Conference (Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Skye)	Session with young people on electoral participation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Workshops to be held with the pupils and discuss the key elements on democracy.</i> • <i>Film booth to film pupils on their views on the key elements.</i> • <i>Run a mock election.</i> • <i>Meet with the MSYP's to discuss election participation.</i> 		YDO's / Election Office
October 2013	Highland Council Headquarters	<i>Deliver training on the role of a democracy ambassadors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Deliver training to Youth Development Officers for appointing representatives in schools.</i> • <i>Circulate democracy packs and other literature to assist with training pupils.</i> • <i>Deliver training to Student Council representatives</i> 		Election Office/ YDO's/
October 2013	Highland Council Equality Impact Online Assessment	Equalities screening and impact assessment carried out to ensure that election arrangements are accessible and inclusive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Full assessment to be carried out for future election plans (eg identifying evidence of concerns, consultation and actions)</i> • <i>Commence review of Polling Places in Highland</i> 		Election Office/ Equal Opp. Officer
November 2013	HYV Conference (Badaguish)	Explore the incentives proposed by the Election Office to engage young people in participating in the democratic process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Outline the Elections Offices incentives to encourage young people to vote.</i> 		Election Office

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Deliver democracy ambassador training to HYV representatives.</i> 		
January 2014	Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee	Work with representative disability groups to find out what could make the voting process easier for their members. (The timing of the meetings would be within 6 months of an election taking place so that information is current and any new arrangements are promoted effectively)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Discuss what can be done to target groups of people with disabilities.</i> • <i>Prepare literature or other aids to assist people with disabilities to highlight that disabled people may take a companion with them to the polling station, or that polling stations have tactile voting templates and large print ballot papers are available to assist with voting.</i> • <i>Transcript of what the Election Office / Assessor's Office added to the BSL transcripts already on the Highland Council website.</i> 		Election Office/ Head of Policy Election Office/ ERO/ Equal Opp. Officer
October 2013	Highland Council Equality Impact Online Assessment	Equalities screening and impact assessment carried out to ensure that election arrangements are accessible and inclusive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Full assessment to be carried out for future election plans (eg identifying evidence of concerns, consultation and actions)</i> 		Election Office
22-May 2013 November 2014	Pilot a mock election of the European Parliamentary Election with a Secondary School	Plan to run a mock election of the European Parliamentary Election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Find a secondary school to participate</i> • <i>CMcD to approach the European Project Team.</i> 		Head Teacher/ YDO / CMcD/ Election Office
November 2014	Highland Youth Voice Election	Plan to manage and run the Highland Youth Voice Elections similar to statutory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Prepare a timetable and guidance in running the HYV Election</i> 		YDO's / WM's/

	(29 Secondary Schools)	elections ie. the setting up polling stations to enable pupils to vote.			Election Office
May 2015	Pilot a mock election in Secondary Schools	Plan to run a mock election of the Scottish Parliamentary Elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Run mock elections in parallel with the Scottish Parliamentary Elections in secondary schools</i> 		Head Teachers/ YDO's / Election Office