

The Highland Council

Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee – 5 December 2013

Agenda Item	3
Report No	CPE 42/13

Highland Elections – Encouraging Participation / Increasing Turnout

Report by the Chief Executive

Summary

This report provides members with an update 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 of the work undertaken by the Election Team and the development of a number of work streams.

2.0 Mock Election

- 2.1 It was agreed at the June meeting of the Committee that Election Team would run a mock European Parliamentary Election in November 2013, in Nairn Academy, for all pupils. The Academy was delighted to be asked to run a mock election, but considered that a mock European Election was not of sufficient interest to the pupils. Staff asked that, instead, a mock referendum on Scottish Independence be held. With the agreement of the Council's Administration, arrangements were made to hold the mock referendum on Thursday 21 November 2013. Poll cards were issued to all pupils, Polling Stations set up and run by pupils, ballot papers (in books of 100) printed, ballot boxes provided and the votes cast were counted on Friday 22 November.
- 2.2 The cost of the mock election will be met from the existing Elections budget.

3.0 Highland Youth Voice

- 3.1 Following the Election Team delivering a democracy session at the Highland Youth Voice (HYV) Conference in Sabhal Mhor Ostaig College, Sleat in June, the development of Democracy Ambassadors in each school has been carried out. Highlife Highland Youth Development Officers assisted the Election Team by highlighting the expected role of Democracy Ambassadors at a HYV Conference at Badaguish, Aviemore in November. The Ambassadors will be expected to cascade information on:
- the importance of registering to vote
 - how to register to vote
 - how to vote at a Polling Station with the setup of a mock polling station

- how to apply for a postal vote or proxy.

3.2 In November 2013 Highland Youth Voice members participated in a survey which included questions about political engagement. Similar questions were asked to over 18s adults across the UK through the Hansard Society survey in December 2012. Generally, Highland Youth Voice members reported they were more interested and engaged in politics than the general public:

- 63% of Highland Youth Voice respondents indicated that they are likely to vote in the Scottish Independence referendum versus 41% of Hansard Society respondents likely to vote in the next General Election
- 90% of Highland Youth Voice respondents reported that they are interested in politics and 67% feel that they know about politics, compared to 42% for both statements for Hansard Society respondents
- 10% of Highland Youth Voice respondents felt politics is a waste of time, compared with 21% of Hansard Society respondents.

3.3 The Highland Youth Voice members reported that they were more likely to act if they felt strongly about an issue; for example contacting a local councillor, taking part in a campaign or attending a political meeting. 60% also agreed with the statement:

“A person like me could do a good job as a local councillor”,

compared with just 27% of Hansard Society respondents.

3.4 Young people indicated they are keen to learn more about politics at school, in particular how the government, local council and political parties work, and how laws are made and implemented. When asked how the political system could be improved:

- 77% agreed that an increase in education would help
- 57% agreed that citizens should have more of a say, for example through referendums
- 53% believe politics should be more transparent so it is easier to follow.

3.5 A quarter of both Highland Youth Voice and the Hansard Society survey felt they had a great deal or some influence over decision making in their area. However, when asked to what extent they would like to become involved, 93% of Highland Youth Voice said very or fairly involved compared to 47% of Hansard Society survey.

4.0 Review Of Scheme Of Polling Districts And Polling Places

4.1 The Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced a duty on all local authorities to Review their UK Parliamentary Polling Districts and Polling Places at least once every four years. The first such Review had to be completed by the end of 2007. Highland Council’s first statutory Review was in 2007 and the second in 2010. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a new provision altering the timing of compulsory Reviews. The compulsory

Review periods are now the period of 16 months beginning with 1 October 2013 and the period of 16 months beginning with 1 October of every fifth year after that.

4.2 The Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places in Highland commenced on Friday 15 November 2013, the intention being to submit a report on the review to the Meeting of the Council being held on 30 October 2014.

4.3 Comments on the Polling Scheme are being sought from:

- o Electors in the Highland area
- o All elected members (i.e. MPs, MSPs, MEPs and Councillors)
- o Disability and Minority Groups – with expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for disabled people
- o Private Premises (used in the Elections in May 2012 as Polling Places)
- o Community Councils in Highland
- o Any person in connection with specified alternative Polling Places.

5.0 By-Elections

5.1 Since the last Committee, two by-elections have been called. As part of the ongoing programme to encourage participation in elections by young people, Secondary Schools in Caithness and the Black Isle have been encouraged to appoint pupils as “Observers” at both by-elections. Observer status afforded the pupils access to the postal Vote opening process, polling stations in the Ward and the By-election Counts.

6.0 Implications

6.1 Resource Implications

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

6.2 Financial Implications

Elements of the Election Participation Programme and the Mock Referendum will be funded from the Elections Budget.

6.3 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 by 30 January 2015.

6.4 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.

6.5 Climate Change/ Carbon Clever Implications

There are no specific climate change implications arising from this report.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to note the ongoing workstreams to encourage participation in elections in Highland.

Designation: Chief Executive

Date: 26 November 2013

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