

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: **THURSDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER 2015**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND CHIEF OFFICER (GOVERNANCE)**

SUBJECT: **FUNCTIONS OF THE ELECTIONS TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 To inform Members on the functions of the Election team and to provide an update on individual electoral registration.

2.00 BACKGROUND

2.01 At the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 May 2015 Councillor Robin Guest queried whether a report on the function of the Election team could be considered at a future meeting. The Chief Officer (Governance) indicated that this could be combined with a report on individual electoral registration (IER).

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

3.01 The Chief Executive is the Returning Officer for County Council and Town and Community Council elections held in Flintshire and the Electoral Registration Officer as well. As a consequence, he automatically becomes:

- the Acting Returning Officer for Parliamentary elections; and
- the Local Returning Officer for the European Parliamentary, National Assembly for Wales and Police and Crime Commissioner elections

3.02 The core elections team comprises the Electoral Services Manager, Electoral Services Officer and Electoral Services Assistant. At major elections the Returning Officer (RO) appoints a Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) (usually the Chief Officer (Governance)). A project board is then established which includes the RO, DRO, Elections Manager, Member Engagement Manager, Communications Manager and Executive Manager. The team is then supported by others from Democratic Services e.g. opening of postal voters and preparing ballot boxes and polling station equipment.

Council employees are used to provide polls and the counts at an election as well as people who are not employed by the Council.

- 3.03 The workload at election time has increased markedly as a result of postal voting on demand, which now accounts for 19,101 out of 117,706 electors which is 16% of the electorate and emergency proxy votes which can be granted up to 5pm on the election day. In addition, there are now IER applications to register, receiving and checking documentary evidence for electors who failed verification.
- 3.04 The performance of RO's is monitored by the Electoral Commission against the standards below. Flintshire met both of these standards.
1. Voters are able to vote easily and know that their vote will be counted in the way they intended.
 2. It is easy for people who want to stand for election to find out how to get involved, what the rules are, and what they have to do to comply with these rules, and they can have confidence in the management of the process and the result.
- 3.05 Flintshire has a proven track record on running and delivering well run elections. This was shown by the feedback received regarding the recent election and during the first Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in 2012 where Flintshire handled all the nominations and co-ordinated the activity across all 6 councils in North Wales as the Police Area Returning Officer. The strength of the elections function been recognised by the Welsh Government who recently appointed the Chief Executive to be the Regional Returning Officer for the North Wales region in the forthcoming Assembly elections and is once again expected to be appointed as the Police Area Returning Officer by Central Government.

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

- 3.06 Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was introduced on 10 June 2014 in England and Wales. It is one of the most significant changes in electoral registration in recent years. Instead of the 'head of household' completing a registration form on behalf of all members of the household, individuals are now required to register to vote individually. This means that individuals in order to register to vote must provide their 'date of birth and national insurance number.

- 3.07 Since the introduction of IER all registered electors had their name and address checked against government records so that they could be confirmed. The vast majority of those on the register were confirmed and automatically transferred to the 'IER register' without having to do anything. For those who needed to provide additional information procedures were put in place to send reminder information and to personal canvass properties and individuals who had not responded. The register that was published on 1 December 2014 saw a decline in the number of electors registered to vote by 1, 700 electors.
- 3.08 In January a Household Notification Letter was sent to households to confirm who was currently registered at each property. This was to encourage electors who were not registered to do so before the Parliamentary election. This was the first time such a letter had been sent. With interest in the election the electorate did increase by over 1, 500 electors.
- 3.09 The annual canvass of properties began at the end of July. Each property in Flintshire received a Household Enquiry Form. Households have the opportunity to respond by telephone, internet, text or by posting the form back. A reminder form was sent to properties who had not responded at the end of August. Invitations to Register have also been sent to electors to register individually, this is done on a weekly basis. Individuals can register on a government website, by telephone or by posting the form back. From the end of September properties and individuals who have not responded to forms we have sent will receive a personal visit from a Canvasser. The revised register will then be published on 1 December 2015.
- 3.10 Subject to an Order being made, the Government has decided to bring forward the end of the transition period for IER from December 2016 to December 2015. This means that those who are currently registered but who are not confirmed and registered under IER will be removed from the register.
- 3.11 To promote Electoral Registration, the team has run the following campaigns working in partnership with all North Wales Councils, this includes a Bus Campaign, Radio Campaign and advertising on Argos till-roll receipts. We have recently worked with Coleg Cambria encouraging students to register to vote.
- 3.12 During this year's campaign we will continue to advertise on Argos till-roll receipts during the month of September, we are running an Annual Canvass campaign on the website, issuing regular press releases and will be running a Twitter campaign. We have asked colleagues to spread the word about registering to vote and to encourage and help service users in doing this. We are also working with colleagues in Council Tax and Housing Benefits in sign posting residents to register to vote when using their services.

3.13 Over recent years with the introduction of 'The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013' there has been a number of changes to Electoral Registration. The modernisation of electoral reform continues with the Law commission's review of Electoral Law. Rt.Hon. Sir Eric Pickles MP's review into electoral fraud and what more can be done to tackle it. The UK Government has introduced legislation, which if passed, will provide for a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU to take place by the end of 2017.

3.14 The Chief Executive has been representing the Wales 'region' at UK level election planning groups working with the Electoral Commission, the Cabinet Office, the Regional Returning Officers from around the UK and other national stakeholders. The team also works actively with North Wales Electoral Services teams, the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office to provide good practice and share ideas.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.01 That the work of the Elections Team and the attempts to encourage greater individual electoral registration be endorsed.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.01 The Parliamentary, Police and Crime Commissioner elections are funded by the Central Government and the National for Wales elections are funded by the Welsh Government.

5.02 The Cabinet Office has provided additional funding for Individual Electoral Registration until April 2016. It is not known if they will provide additional funding beyond this date.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 None as a result of this report.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 None as a result of this report.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 None as a result of this report.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 None as a result of this report.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 None

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 None

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 None

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

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