

REPORT TO: TAYSIDE VALUATION JOINT BOARD – 25 JANUARY 2021

REPORT ON: ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

REPORT BY: ASSESSOR

REPORT NO: TVJB 4-2021

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report seeks to update the Joint Board on electoral registration issues relating to the Scottish Parliamentary Election, which is scheduled to take place on 6 May 2021.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that the Joint Board note that:

- The Scottish Parliamentary Election will take place on 6 May 2021.
- The Scottish Government has enacted legislation which has amended the deadline by which postal vote applications must be made to 21 days before the date of the poll (i.e. 6 April 2021).
- The Convenor of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland has directed that Electoral Registration Officers put in place additional capacity to facilitate the processing of the likely increased volume of postal vote applications.
- In order to provide such increased capacity the Electoral Registration Officer has initiated a recruitment process which will seek to recruit 10 additional temporary members of staff for the period from 1 February 2021 until 6 May 2021.
- The Electoral Registration Officer will continue to engage with both the Scottish Government and colleague Electoral Registration Officers in order to facilitate the uptake of postal voting at an early date and to avoid a last minute surge in applications that may stretch beyond the available capacity.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 The Scottish Government has agreed to provide funding to support the provision of additional capacity to facilitate increased postal vote numbers. Funding of £148,403 has been allocated to the electoral registration function in the Angus Council and Perth and Kinross Council areas and this will be utilised to resource the appointment of the temporary staff noted above, together with any related IT, licensing costs etc. Separate discussions with the Scottish Government are currently underway regarding the resourcing of activities aimed at promoting postal voting.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 This report has been screened for any policy implications in respect of Sustainability, Strategic Environment Assessment, Anti-Poverty and Equality Impact Assessment. There are no major issues.

5 BACKGROUND

5.1 The next Scottish Parliamentary Election is scheduled to be held on 6 May 2021. Notwithstanding the current situation with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic the Scottish Government has indicated that this election will go ahead.

5.2 The Scottish Government has however recognised that the current Covid-19 pandemic may impact on the conduct of this election and has introduced a range of measures aimed at mitigating these impacts. Whilst many measures relate to the conduct of the poll itself, other measures concern an anticipated increase in demand for postal voting and these are noted below:

- The deadline by which any postal vote application must be made has been amended to 21 working days before the date of the poll (i.e. 6 April 2021).
- Additional funding is to be provided to Electoral Registration Officers to allow them to appoint temporary staff to assist with the processing of additional postal votes.
- Dialogue is continuing with the Scottish Government regarding the most appropriate means of promoting postal voting to individuals who do not currently have a postal vote.

5.3 In the light of the above situation, the Convenor of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland has exercised his powers to make formal directions to both Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers concerning preparations for the poll. These directions include:

“Direction 7: Anticipating a significant increase in postal vote numbers, following Electoral Commission research undertaken in August and November 2020, Electoral Registration Officers are directed to put in place capacity to facilitate the processing of the likely volume of postal vote applications in time for the election.”

5.4 The Electoral Registration Officer has therefore initiated a recruitment process with the aim of appointing 10 additional temporary members of staff to assist with the processing of postal votes. It is anticipated that, circumstances allowing, these staff will be appointed for the period from 1 February 2021 until 6 May 2021. Due to the nature of the task these staff members will be required to work within the Joint Board’s offices in Forfar and in Perth and this will require other supervising and supporting staff to attend the offices during this period. If necessary, in order to maintain appropriate social distancing and other health and safety measures relevant to the Covid-19 pandemic, staff not essential to the processing of the election shall continue working remotely from the offices during this period.

5.5 The Electoral Registration Officer will continue to liaise with both the Scottish Government and colleague Electoral Registration Officers to ascertain the most effective means of facilitating postal voting for electors who do not currently have a postal vote in place. Current avenues being pursued include a national advertising campaign and a write out to those electors who do not currently have a postal vote in place advising them of the mechanisms to make an application should they wish to do so.

5.6 It will be a key element of the process to ensure that:

- Any promotional activity aimed at facilitating postal voting takes place at an early date: The risks attached to a very large numbers of electors submitting an application for a postal vote close to the statutory deadline are very significant. Such an outcome may potentially result in individual electors being disenfranchised because an application is not submitted timeously. It may also result in such substantial numbers of electors submitting applications very close to the deadline that the system is overwhelmed and applications cannot be processed within the statutory timescales.
- Electors who already have a postal vote in place are not included with any promotional activities. Any such actions risk confusing electors and overburdening an already stretched Electoral Registration system.

6 CONSULTATION

6.1 The Clerk and Treasurer to the Board have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1 None.

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January 2021