

FOR PUBLICATION

ELECTION SERVICE STAFFING

MEETING: EMPLOYMENT & GENERAL COMMITTEE

DATE: 24 AUGUST 2015

REPORT BY: DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND ELECTIONS
MANAGER

WARD: ALL

COMMUNITY
ASSEMBLY: ALL

FOR PUBLICATION

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To review the staffing structure of the Electoral Services Team within Democratic Services following a vacancy in the post of Elections Assistant.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

2.1 To increase the permanent establishment within the Democratic Services Electoral Services Team by an additional 15 hours in the post of Election Assistant.

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 The Electoral Services team forms part of the Democratic Services Section in the former Governance Service.

3.2 The unit is managed by the Democratic Services and Elections Manager, supported by a full time post of Elections Officer and a part time (22 hours) post of Elections Assistant. Both posts of Election Officer and Elections Assistant were filled by new appointments in July 2014 following the conclusion of the Governance service staffing review. Prior to that time the post of

Elections Assistant had been held vacant for 12 months, pending the outcome of the service restructure during which time the vacant post was filled by temporary staff.

- 3.3 The elections service is responsible for the delivery of all national and local elections in the Borough, reporting to the Chief Executive as the Council's Returning Officer (RO), a statutory officer appointment, independent of the Council. In addition the Chief Executive is the Council's appointed Electoral Registration Officer (ERO), a statutory officer appointment, responsible for compiling and maintaining the electoral registers for over 80,000 parliamentary and local government electors, and receiving and determining applications from electors for absent voting arrangements. The electoral registration service is also delivered by the electoral services team.
- 3.4 Funding for core electoral services teams and for electoral registration is provided by local authorities. The RO can recover specified expenses incurred in running an election but this does not include funding for the core electoral services team or for registration and absent vote processes, both of which are an integral and critical part of the overall electoral service.
- 3.5 For electoral registration the local authority has a duty to provide the ERO with the necessary resources to discharge their statutory functions and any expenses properly incurred by an ERO in the performance of their functions must be paid by the local authority that appointed them. These duties are set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983 as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 and require the ERO to take all necessary steps to comply with the duty to maintain the electoral register and to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that all those eligible (and no others) are registered in it.
- 3.6 The Council's elections service was last reviewed in 2013 as part of a wider Governance Service review. That review confirmed the current structure but recognised that the adequacy of the staffing levels needed to be kept under review having regard to the impact of changes to the electoral framework and in particular the likely introduction of Individual Elector Registration (IER) from 2014. It was noted at that time that the current service structure relied on the support of additional temporary staffing to meet peaks in workload and that this was likely to be the case during the transition to IER. Subsequently in March 2014 Financial Planning Group agreed to an

increase in the hours of the part time post of Elections Assistant to make it a full time post for a temporary two year period subject to review thereafter.

- 3.7 The post of Elections Assistant has now become vacant and it is sensible to review the establishment and service needs now rather than extend the temporary arrangements for a further year. If the post is recruited to on the existing terms (part permanent half time and part temporary half time for 12 months) it is likely to limit the pool of suitable candidates and would build an unnecessary level of uncertainty into the resourcing of the PCC election in May 2016. Because of the specialist nature of the work and the small pool from which to recruit experienced staff it requires an investment in training and development that is not realistic or cost effective with a temporary staffing solution. It is essential that capacity is built and retained in a small team which provides such a critical service.
- 3.8 Evidence from the Cabinet Office, the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators professional body clearly points to an increased volume of work and complexity in both elections and electoral registration over the last few years. In 2007 the Electoral Commission produced guidance on establishing election units within new unitary authorities and supported findings suggesting a staffing ratio of one full time member of staff per 40,000 electorate plus a manager. Comparison of Chesterfield's election staffing ratios with other Derbyshire authorities and our family group of authorities shows Chesterfield's permanent establishment to be under resourced by at least one half time staff member.
- 3.9 From our own experience the workload of the elections unit has grown considerably in recent years, brought about by legislative changes and the introduction of a standards and performance monitoring regime by the Electoral Commission. PCC elections and a range of referendums have been added to the elections timetable. Postal voting continues to be a popular option with almost 20% of our electorate, a higher average than other authorities of a comparable size. The legislative requirement to refresh postal vote applications on a rolling annual programme is a further demand on the service.
- 3.10 However the single biggest change has been the introduction of IER which replaced the established system of household registration. This system shifted responsibility onto the individual to register themselves, and introduced for the first time the facility to register on

line. Electors on the register now remain registered until they move house though the ERO must carry out an annual household canvass to update the register entries and to identify any new potential electors to whom a personal invitation to register must then be issued.

- 3.11 The introduction of IER carried with it a new duty for the ERO to encourage registration and to use resources to maintain an accurate and up to date register through data mining and data matching. The duty extends to carrying out household and other enquiries to identify new electors and then taking steps to register new potential electors individually. The IER annual household canvass has introduced additional processes and evidence requirements before which the ERO can make additions and deletions to the register, where previously these changes could be made based on evidence supplied on the canvas form.
- 3.12 This includes sending out up to 3 forms by post both to households and non-registered individuals followed by personal visits to secure a registration. The new system is heavily reliant on paper systems at the point of invitation, reminder and confirmation, despite the introduction of on line registration. Further developments are needed both at national and local level to streamline the new registration process, to reduce the reliance on paper based systems, and realise the potential savings and efficiencies. Central government is working actively with its key stakeholders; EROs, the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Administrators professional body, and elections software systems suppliers to address these issues whilst acknowledging that some of these will require legislative change. Within the council the Election Team is engaged with other council services in meeting this challenge and the council's planned investment in improving electronic access with its customers, particularly in capturing email addresses, will aid that process.

4.0 PROPOSAL

- 4.1 It is proposed that the permanent part time post of Elections Assistant, Scale 5, in the Democratic Services Section be made a permanent full time position. This would increase the permanent staffing establishment in the elections team from 22 hours to 37 hours. There are no other changes proposed to the terms and conditions of the post.

5.0 FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 The cost of the proposal to make the Elections Assistant post full time is an additional £8,876 based on an appointment at the top of the scale. The full year cost of a full time post at scale 5, top point of scale, with overheads is £23,690. The salary grading for the post is within the range £17,714 to £19,742.
- 5.2 The registration budget for 2015/16 includes a budget of £28,400 to cover salaries and overheads for this post and any additional temporary staffing. Therefore the cost of the proposal can be met without the need for additional resources. The remainder of the controllable budget, ie excluding staffing costs and internal recharge costs is £52,630.
- 5.3 The registration budget has traditionally carried a surplus in order to meet the costs of the service, which can vary markedly from year to year. Following an analysis of budget spending in the 2013 spending review the budget surplus was reduced by £15,000, suspended to 2015. However the reduced core budget is still sufficient to meet anticipated staffing costs arising from this proposal. The costs of employing additional temporary assistance in the elections team for registration work over the period 2014/15 to date was £13,028 and this included a three month period when the post of Election Assistant was vacant. The need for on-going temporary assistance post IER transition will be kept under review but there is funding within the core budget and through government grant to continue the current levels of temporary staffing should this be necessary.
- 5.4 The government has said it is committed to meeting the additional net costs of the new IER responsibility and has provided grant assistance over the 3 years from 2013/14 to date totalling £82,464. This includes a grant for the current year of £23,996. The grants are supplementary funding to meet the additional net costs of IER and are not intended to be used to offset the general costs of registration. Consequently the grant was made conditional on a signed undertaking from the Head of Finance as Section 151 Officer that there would be no reduction applied to the core funding as a consequence of the grant. The grant is not ring fenced to give authorities flexibility to invest their funding creatively and efficiently. However the grant has been largely piecemeal, at short notice and with no long term commitment or clarification as to the likely level of funding between each grant allocation, making planning difficult. It is

not clear whether there will be any further funding beyond this financial year.

5.5 It has largely been possible to meet the costs of the IER transition, including any additional staffing costs, from the existing registration budget. Government grant has been used to supplement existing engagement work, to purchase new hardware, carry out local data matching and to fund a household confirmation of residency letter in advance of the 2015 elections. There remains a grant balance of £67,697, part of which will be used to cover anticipated additional costs arising from the first IER canvass this autumn. Once a full year of costs under IER, including the new canvass arrangements, is available it will be possible to plan with more certainty the further use of the grant, including where necessary any further investment in IT solutions.

6.0 RISK MANAGEMENT

Description of the Risk	Impact	Likelihood	Mitigating Action	Impact	Likelihood
Failing to meet the ERO or ROs duty to provide the necessary resources for registrations and elections	Personal liability on the ERO and RO. Reputational issue for the Council	Medium	Assessment of staffing levels and ensuring trained and resourced service.	High	Low
Difficulty in recruiting to temporary post	Capacity in the service, impact on service and other members of the team, loss of expertise and investment in staff	Medium	Additional training and support to temporary staff.	High	Medium

7.0 EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1 None. The post is shortly to become vacant.

8.0 CONCLUSIONS

8.1 There is a clear and continuing need for an increase in the core establishment to meet the demands on the service which would be

best met by making the vacant post of Elections Assistant a full time post. This would provide greater resilience and capacity within the team, and allow resources to be directed in the most cost effective and efficient way. There will be no additional financial burden from the proposals.

9.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

9.1 To extend the temporary arrangements for a further period. This is not recommended for the reasons given at paragraph 3.7.

10.0 RECOMMENDATION

10.1 To increase the permanent establishment within the Democratic Services Electoral Services Team by an additional 15 hours in the post of Election Assistant.

11.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

11.1 To build capacity and resilience in the Electoral Services team to ensure that it continues to meet the challenges and needs of the service.

You can get more information about this report from Sandra Essex (T: 01246 345227, or email: sandra.essex@chesterfield.gov.uk).