

## **MAY 2023 ELECTIONS, ELECTORAL AND NEW COUNCIL ARRANGEMENTS**

### **1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

1.1 That the Section 151 Officer:-

- a) Notes the preparation of the significant programme of work underway to deliver the changes arising from the Electoral Review, the introduction of new election legislation and the 2023 Elections and supporting governance arrangements;
- b) Exercises his authority to set aside financial regulations and establish a supplementary project budget, up to £177,000, to support urgent additional temporary resources necessary to deliver this extensive programme over the next two years; and
- c) Agrees that this report be presented to Cabinet and Council in accordance with the Council's Financial Regulations.

### **2. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE**

- 2.1 The changes arising from the Electoral Review of the New Forest District come into effect for the May 2023 elections and significant work is necessary to implement these changes and ensure the new Council can move forward from 2023 with appropriate governance arrangements.
- 2.2 The Election Bill is likely to receive Royal Assent in May 2022 and will introduce changes to the way in which elections are administered, most significantly the introduction of voter identification in Polling Stations. Some of these changes will require implementation ahead of elections held in May 2023.
- 2.3 With the endorsement of the Council's Returning Officer (the Chief Executive), who has statutory responsibility for ensuring the correct running of the elections and that proper resources are in place to deliver them, this report outlines the extensive work being undertaken to prepare for the May 2023 elections and new Council arrangements.
- 2.4 The report also deals with the necessary resources to support Electoral Services, Democratic Services and the wider organisation to deliver these changes and ensuring the necessary preparations for the May 2023 elections and beyond.
- 2.5 The report recommends that the S151 Officer exercises his delegated authority to establish this budget to avoid any delay to the urgent recruitment work required to support the delivery of the necessary work programme.

### **3. ELECTORAL REVIEW**

- 3.1 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) undertook an Electoral Review of the New Forest, commencing in 2019, to deliver electoral equality for voters across the district. The final recommendations, now enacted, concluded that New Forest District Council should have 48 councillors, 12 fewer than there are now, with 26 wards, a decrease of eight. The boundaries of all existing wards change as a result with the 48 councillors representing two three-councillor wards, 18 two-councillor wards, and six single-councillor wards.
- 3.2 As a result of LGBCEs final recommendations on new warding patters, changes were also made to the parish electoral arrangements for the six town/parish councils of:
- Fawley
  - Hythe & Dibden
  - Lymington & Pennington
  - New Milton
  - Ringwood
  - Totton & Eling
- 3.3 It is now necessary to redraw all 26 ward boundaries to support the District Council's new electoral arrangements as well as the parish ward boundaries of the town and parish councils identified.
- 3.4 New ward arrangements for NFDC will come into force at the local elections in May 2023 and significant work is underway to redraw boundaries and identify properties therein to create the new electoral register for these elections. Polling districts, the geographic subdivision of wards, will also need to be reviewed to ensure they are coterminous with the new ward boundaries and that polling stations continue to be accessible and appropriately situated.
- 3.5 Statutory reviews of polling districts, polling places and polling stations are governed by legislative requirements and this formal review process will be followed to ensure the necessary criteria is met.
- 3.6 A significant programme of work is underway in preparation for these necessary reviews, supported by Electoral Services, Democratic Services, Communications and ICT.

### **4. ELECTIONS LEGISLATION**

- 4.1 The Elections Bill 2021-22, introduced to the House of Commons in July 2021, makes changes to election law, intended to protect the integrity of the UK's democracy. The Bill is currently at committee stage in the House of Lords and, subject to agreement, is expected to receive Royal Assent in May 2022.
- 4.2 In summary the Bill seeks to:
- Require voters to show photo identification at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued

- Require Electoral Registration Officers, based in local authorities, to issue free voter identification documents to those without a valid form of photo identification
  - Require postal voters to reapply for a postal vote every three years, replacing current rules of refreshing their signature every five years
  - Restrict the handling of postal votes, including limiting the number of postal votes an individual can hand in at a polling station
  - Further limit the number of people someone may act as proxy for
  - Extend accessibility to elections including requiring Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide support for those with a disability in polling stations
  - Simplify and clarify the offence of undue influence
  - Change the voting and candidacy arrangements for EU voters
  - Allow all British Citizens living overseas to voter in UK Parliamentary elections, regardless of when they left the UK
- 4.3 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) are still developing the policy, primary and secondary legislation and more detail will be shared with local authorities in due course. The preliminary timetable makes provision for voter ID and accessibility requirements to be implemented for May 2023 polls, with electors being able to apply to their local authority for a voter ID card from December 2022.
- 4.4 The majority of the changes will result in a new financial burden being placed on the Council and it is anticipated that these costs will be initially covered in line with new burdens principles. Resources are needed to respond to these new requirements and fulfil the statutory duties of the Returning Officer in delivering national and local elections.
- 4.5 In addition to the Elections Bill, the Fixed Term Parliament Act has now been repealed which means that a parliamentary election can be called at any time. Unscheduled parliamentary or local by-elections divert resources from project and day-day service delivery, and further test the limited resources of the core team. A flexible budget is required to respond to such events at short notice.

## **5. MAY 2023 ELECTIONS**

- 5.1 The District and Parish quadrennial elections will take place on 4 May 2023 and will reflect the new electoral arrangements and legislative changes required. These elections are complex and resource intensive, electing councillors to the 26 district wards and administering up to 37 parish elections. This could involve electing up to 398 councillors in total, subject to the number of contested seats.
- 5.2 Arrangements to support the administration of these elections will be extensive and an all-council approach will be adopted to ensure that the appropriate skills and disciplines from within organisation are used to support their successful delivery. This need will increase as we move towards the 2023 calendar year and, in addition to the budgetary requirement set out in this report, further staff resources from within the existing Council, will be necessary to support the work.
- 5.3 A new form of poll card will be necessary to align with the introduction of voter ID in polling stations. This is likely to take the form of an enveloped letter to accommodate

the list of acceptable forms of identification and will need to be effectively communicated to electors, along with the other changes they should expect to see at the elections.

## **6. NEW COUNCIL 2023**

6.1 As the Electoral Review is implemented and the Council reduces to 48 councillors, a number of governance related projects are planned to ensure the new Council can operate effectively from 2023 onwards. These include but are not limited to: -

- Council Constitution
- Scheme of Delegation
- Arrangements for dealing with complaints made against councillors
- Members' Allowances
- Council Chamber AV
- Councillor use of ICT for 2023 onwards
- Councillor Training and Induction for 2023 onwards

6.2 The delivery of these projects is being led by the Council's three Statutory Officers; the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer, supported by the Democratic Services Manager. There will be a need for additional resources to deliver this necessary work, as outlined in section 7 of the report.

## **7. RESOURCES REQUIREMENTS**

7.1 A project governance structure has been set up to support the delivery of this extensive programme of work, with a Project Board consisting of the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer, Section 151 Officer, Elections and Business Improvement Manager and Democratic Services Manager, overseeing the delivery of the core 2023 Elections. The Council's Statutory Officers Group is monitoring the implementation of the wider governance programme of work. It is recognised that additional resources will be necessary to deliver the actions in the given timescale.

7.2 Existing resources in the core elections and democratic services teams do not allow for this significant increased workload whilst maintaining normal services which includes rolling electoral registration, the annual electoral canvass, postal vote refresh, annual overseas registration and administering scheduled, unplanned elections and supporting the Council's decision-making functions and day to day governance arrangements. The need for two additional temporary posts has been identified initially, and approved by EMT, to deliver the projects identified, including:

- Changes to local electoral arrangements and ward boundaries, including a Polling District Review
- Introduction of new legislation arising from the Elections Bill, including voter ID in polling stations
- May 2023 election support, including support for the communication of changes
- Increasing electoral engagement
- Resilience to the core Electoral Services and Democratic Services teams to ensure delivery of day-to-day business

- 7.3 Communications will be critical to ensuring electors are engaged and understand the multiple changes ahead of the polls. A communications plan is in the process of being drafted which will include multiple channels to ensure wide and regular coverage of the key messages, including hard to reach groups. This will form a significant element of the Communications team's work programme for 2022/23 and 2023/24.
- 7.4 ICT has already been involved in the importing of mapping data from the LGBCE and will be instrumental in supporting the implementation of digital solutions in response to the Elections Bill, including the local provision of voter ID cards. Again, this will form part of the ICT work programme as clarity over solutions emerge.
- 7.5 Customer Services will assist in the response to resident enquiries, freeing up the core team to focus on the delivery of the elections. It is anticipated that enquiries will arise out of the changes to ward names and boundaries, as well as the new legislative requirements and this will need to be prioritised as the polls approach. This will require additional resources and training to effectively respond at the first point of contact.
- 7.6 The establishment of a project budget is recommended up to the value of £177,000 to support these additional temporary resources and will also allow flexibility to bring in other external support, as required, to assist in the delivery of the May 2023 elections. The Elections Project Support Officer and Principal Democratic Services Officer roles are required as a priority, to support the internal expertise in order to build the necessary enhanced capacity and ensuring value for money. Many councils bring in temporary external support to specifically deal with the peak in delivery around major elections.
- 7.7 The proposal to increase resources and secure a project budget has the support of the Chief Executive in her statutory roles of Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer.

## 8 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The fixed term project support post will cost c£97,000 over the two-year period and will be partially offset by £50,000 of savings arising from the changes to the annual electoral canvass and new burdens funding.
- 8.2 The fixed term Principal Democratic Services Officer post is estimated to cost approximately £80,000 over an 18-month period.
- 8.3 Additional resources are also likely to be needed to support effective communications, the ICT response, and Customer Services, along with any necessary specialist skills that will need to be brought in to support the delivery of the elections themselves. The remaining budget will allow for further external resources to be brought in, if considered necessary by the Chief Executive, who will need to be able to react quickly if the need arises;

Description	Estimated Financial Impact
Fixed Term Project Support	£97,000
Fixed Term Principal Democratic Services Officer	£80,000
Offsetting Savings and New Burdens Funding	(£50,000)

Pool Budget for Additional Resource	£50,000
<b>TOTAL NET PROJECT BUDGET</b>	<b>£177,000</b>

- 8.4 The estimated annual savings as a result of the Boundary Review amount to £80,000 per annum. These savings are included within the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan.
- 8.5 To expediate the securing of additional resources the Section 151 officer, in agreement with both the Chief Executive (also the Returning Officer) and the Council's Monitoring Officer, is recommended to use his delegated authority (Section 1.3 Financial Regulations) to suspend Financial Regulations and approve this supplementary budget requirement. This will be reported to Council, as required.

## **9 CRIME AND DISORDER / EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY / ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 None arising directly from this report, although electoral engagement will be included in the role of the project support officer to promote and provide opportunities for people to register to vote. Accessibility requirements arising from the Elections Bill will also support voters with disabilities to cast their vote more easily.

## **10 DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The accuracy of data will be instrumental to the successful delivery of these projects and appropriate arrangements will be in place to process this data, at all times.

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