

Committee: **Council**

Date of Meeting: **25<sup>th</sup> November, 2021**

Report Subject: **Planning, Administration and Cost of Local Elections – 5th May, 2022**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor N. Daniels – Leader/Executive Member for Corporate Services**

Report Submitted by: **Managing Director, Michelle Morris (in the role of Returning Officer for Local Government Elections)**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance & Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
	28/10/21						25/11/21	

1. **Purpose of the Report**

The purpose of the report is to outline and seek approval for the resourcing and funding requirements in respect of the forthcoming local elections in May 2022, seek approval for payments to staff, and explain the main accountabilities in the administration of efficient local elections.

2. **Scope and Background**

Local Elections are a statutory responsibility for the Council and are due to be held on 5th May, 2022. As a result of the Local Boundary Review, Blaenau Gwent will reduce from 42 to 33 seats for the whole of the Council. There will also be a reduction in the number of Electoral Divisions from 16 to 14.

In addition, elections will take place in respect of town/community council seats in Tredegar, Brynmawr, Nantyglo & Blaina and Abertillery & Llanhilleth. The local Returning Officer (the Managing Director) must ensure compliance with a wide variety of election and electoral legislation, which includes a number of electoral acts and the Electoral Commission Standards for Returning Officers. The main function of the role is to ensure that the election is administered effectively and that, as a result, the experience of voters and those standing for election is a positive one. The Returning Officer has personal responsibility for elections outside her role for the Council and separate fees for the discharge of these duties are usually paid by way of remuneration.

Local elections are particularly challenging. The level of preparatory work undertaken ahead of the elections is extensive and will need to reflect assumptions such as the likely number of contested elections (all County Borough seats are usually contested but the number of town/community contests vary), the number of candidates, number of postal voters, and voter turnout. There may be a significant number of new or less experienced

political parties, candidates and agents who are unfamiliar with the practices and processes of an election and who will need more assistance to be able to participate in the democratic process effectively.

For information, the main heads for election administration in brief are:-

- Candidates & Agents briefings
- Publishing Notice of Election
- The provision of polling stations
- Accepting and checking nominations during the allotted period in the election timetable.
- Appointing and training Polling Station Staff including the appointment of polling station inspectors
- Publishing the Notice of Poll, Statement of Persons Nominated and Notice of Situation of Polling Stations
- Printing ballot papers
- Managing the postal voting process
- Certifying and counting the votes
- Declaring the Results
- Acceptance of candidates' financial returns.

With the reference to the Count and Declaration of results, it should be noted that in common with most other Welsh Councils, this will take place on the day after the Poll i.e. on Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2022.

The Notice of Election will be published on 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2022 and thereafter formal Council business will cease during the pre-election period i.e. no council or committee meetings will be held, unless there is urgent business that needs to be attended to. The Council Diary will be amended accordingly.

### 3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 a. (Preferred option) Council notes the information provided and agrees to resource and fund the Election and associated costs as set out in the report.  
b. Council does not agree all or part of the resourcing and funding proposal and provides comments/suggestions on alternative arrangements.

### 4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

Councils have a statutory duty to hold Local Elections, usually every 5 years.

### 5. **Implications Against Each Option**

#### 5.1.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

The Council must fund the local election as the cost will not be met by central or Welsh Government, as is the case with other elections.

The cost to the Council of delivering the Local Election in 2017 was £109,131. Taking into consideration inflationary uplift and other cost increases it is estimated that the cost of the 2022 election will be approximately £140,000.

5.1.2 The Council is currently forecasting a favourable variance against its in year budget as a result it is proposed that £140,000 of this underspend be allocated to the Election Earmarked Reserve to be utilised during 2022 to fund the costs of the election.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

Elections are managed by a few key officers, and if one of the officers were ill or otherwise unavailable at election time there is a risk to the delivery plan. The risk is minimised by having effective election project plans and risk assessments in place which are reviewed regularly and by the appointment of Deputy Returning Officers who would be authorised to run the election in the absence of the Returning Officer.

As with all elections, there are many potential areas of challenge and the Council provides insurance indemnity for elections and also to cover the risk that an election petition be called, which could be within 21 days after the elections. It is the Returning Officer (and not the Council) who is personally at risk of challenge and they must file a response to any election petition received, and defend any allegations.

5.3 ***Legal***

The conduct of Elections is largely governed by statute and guidance issued by the Electoral Commission.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

The Returning Officer has personal legal responsibility for the conduct of the election and is delivering a service to the Council outside their substantive paid role. For this reason, all Councils in Wales remunerate the RO, DROs and their staff in terms of Election duties. Staff receive an hourly payment for hours worked outside the “normal” working day, and a fixed fee for certain other duties.

The schedule attached to this report indicate the level of fees payable (these may be subject to change as a result of any increase in the Foundation Living Wage level from April 2022). It should be noted that additional external staff are also employed to assist with tasks such postal vote openings, election station staffing and the count itself.

It is anticipated that to run an effective and safe election the Returning Officer will require 163 staff on polling day and 93 staff on at the count. These will mainly be Council staff who will be released from their normal duties to deliver the election.

6. ***Supporting Evidence***

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

The Electoral Commission has issued Performance Standards for Returning Officers and will monitor delivery of local elections against these standards.

- 6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***  
A key aspect of the requirements placed on the Returning Officer is to ensure that voter is able to access information and participate in the democratic process of the election.
- 6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***  
The Welsh Government has made additional funding available to councils to support an Engagement Officer in the period running up to the election. This officer will work across the Council and in particular with Coleg Gwent and Secondary Schools to ensure first time voters are fully aware of their right to vote in next years' local election.
- 6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***  
*n/a*
- 6.5 ***Preventative focus***  
*n/a*
- 6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***  
The Council will work with partners, as appropriate, to ensure the safe and efficient management of the local election. This will include Coleg Gwent and schools to ensure engagement of first time voters.
- 6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***  
*n/a*
- 6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***  
*n/a*
- 6.9a ***Socio Economic Duty Impact Assessment***  
*n/a*
- 6.9b. ***Equality Impact Assessment***  
Copy attached.