

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 2 March 2021

By: Chief Operating Officer

Title: Staff leave policy – election duties

Purpose: To seek the Committee’s agreement to the proposed approach to granting staff paid leave to undertake election duties in May 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Governance Committee is recommended to agree the proposed approach as set out in paragraph 2.4 of this report.

1 Background

1.1 It is now confirmed that local elections will take place on 6 May 2021. In East Sussex this includes the County Council elections as well as the Police and Crime Commissioner election and an election for half the seats on Hastings Borough Council, both of which were delayed from 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 There are added complexities in running the elections this year given ongoing Covid-19 restrictions which are very likely to remain in place in some form in May. These complexities include requirements for hygiene and social distancing measures and the additional staff needed to implement these safeguards.

2 Supporting Information

2.1 A key risk to the successful running of the local elections in the context of Covid-19 is the availability of adequate numbers of polling staff. The availability of staff is expected to be impacted by reduced willingness of previous staff to undertake roles at polling stations coupled with the need for additional staff to supervise social distancing and undertake the regular sanitising of equipment which will be required.

2.2 The District and Borough Councils, who administer the elections, have highlighted in their risk assessments that the availability of staff is a significant issue. This assessment is based on the response they have received to date from contacting staff who have previously worked on elections, set against the increased staffing requirement.

2.3 At present, County Council staff wishing to undertake election duties are not entitled to paid leave for this purpose. The Council’s Paid and Unpaid Leave Policy states that staff may request unpaid leave or alternatively, annual leave, flexi time or time off in lieu to carry out these duties.

2.4 Given the additional challenges presented by holding an election during Covid-19 restrictions, it is proposed to temporarily change this approach for the May 2021 election, enabling staff to request paid leave to undertake election duties in order to support Districts and Boroughs in ensuring adequate staffing of polling stations. It is proposed that this change only relates to the May 2021 elections in recognition of the very exceptional circumstances and that this does not set a precedent in relation to the leave arrangements for future elections.

2.5 Requests for paid leave for this purpose would be subject to approval by line managers to ensure that staff absence does not unduly impact on County Council services. The needs of the service will be the primary consideration.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

3.1 The running of local elections in May in the context of ongoing Covid-19 restrictions presents additional challenges, including the availability of sufficient polling staff. In light of this, the Committee is recommended to agree the proposed approach to paid staff leave for election duties in May 2021 as set out in paragraph 2.4 of this report.

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