

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

SPECIAL MEETING OF COUNCIL - 13 FEBRUARY 2003

THE LOCAL PROMOTION OF THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS IN 2003

Report by Chief Executive

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1** To seek Council approval for Officers to undertake a limited local promotion exercise to publicise electoral issues in relation to the forthcoming Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** The Electoral Commission came into existence on 30 November 2000. It is a UK-wide body, independent of Government and answerable directly to Parliament. The Commission has a wide-ranging remit in regard to the electoral process, covering such issues as registration of political parties, regulating political donations, reporting on elections, reviewing electoral law and promoting awareness of electoral and democratic systems.
- 2.2** The Commissions' remit covers Westminster, European and Scottish Parliamentary and the National Assembly for Wales and Northern Irish Assembly Elections. The Government remains responsible for electoral legislation and the underpinning policy, but has a statutory duty to consult the Commission on proposals for change in key areas. Whilst the Commission does not have a direct role in the Scottish Local Government elections it has agreed a protocol with the Scottish Executive in order that the Commission can provide training, public awareness and undertake a review of the Local Government elections to ensure a consistent approach with regard to the Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections.
- 2.3** The Commission has been developing a public awareness campaign and has appointed a PR company to carry out the campaign. The campaign will be a Scotland-wide campaign covering both the Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections. The campaign will be in three stages covering rolling registration and a reminder to be registered, absent voting campaign and then a final campaign explaining the three votes, two for the Scottish Parliament and one for Local Government. The final aspect of the campaign has been organised in conjunction with the Scottish Executive.

3. LOCAL PROMOTION OF ELECTORAL ISSUES

- 3.1** The Electoral Commission has published a research report prepared by independent researchers on behalf of the Commission which examined the work done by Local Authorities across the UK to publicise electoral issues. **A**

copy of the Electoral Commission's research report - "Making an Impact: The Local Promotion of Electoral Issues" has been placed in the Members' Information Point for reference.

- 3.2** It is the Electoral Commission's view that Local Authorities should be prepared to develop campaigns designed to facilitate a turnout as well as promoting registration. The Commission does not accept that there is any reason in principle why such promotion should not be done by Electoral Registration Officers and Local Authorities.
- 3.3** The report provides a number of recommendations on good practice and also recognises that any promotional campaigns around elections could be seen as contravening Codes of Conduct on Publicity because any campaign to get people to vote could be seen as a campaign to get people to vote in a particular way. The report recognises that this is an area which may require some form of guidance at national level. In addition, the report also recognises the need to obtain the support of politicians with regard to local promotion of electoral issues.
- 3.4** Notwithstanding the comments contained within paragraph 3.3 above, the report does provide useful information on local promotion of electoral issues and Officers are seeking Council approval to carry out a targeted local exercise complementing the Commission's national campaign.
- 3.5** The local promotion would concentrate on reminding voters to ensure that they are registered to vote and provide relevant information in respect of proxy and postal voting.
- 3.6** The promotion of this information would be carried out through a poster campaign in Local Offices, Libraries, supermarkets and other specific establishments such as residential units for older people.
- 3.7** The Council's website also provides information on registration, postal and proxy voting. It is intended, subject to approval by Council, to develop the website to provide further specific information for public consumption in respect of the 2003 elections, such as information on polling places.
- 3.8** Approaches will also be made to the local media to encourage promotion of the above electoral issues

4. LEGAL/POLICY IMPLICATIONS - Nil.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1** No additional funding has been provided by the Government or the Commission to support publicity initiatives. However, funding has been identified within the Council's democratic process budget. It is proposed that the specifically targeted local promotion exercise should not exceed £400 in cost.

6. RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1** To consider a limited local promotion exercise for the Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections as detailed in paragraph 3.5, 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8.
- 6.2** To remit to the Chief Executive in consultation with appropriate Officers to prepare and distribute appropriate publicity material, copies of which would be circulated to the political groups within East Ayrshire Council for their information.

David Montgomery
Chief Executive

BW/FM

5 February 2003

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 1. The Electoral Commission Circular EC47/2002 dated 18 October 2002.
- 2. Electoral Commission Report - "Making an Impact: The Local Promotion of Electoral Issues"

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers relative to this report should contact Bill Walkinshaw, Administrative Manager on 01563 576135. Any person wishing further information on this report should contact Bill Walkinshaw, Administration Manager on 01563 576135.