

Divisions Affected – N/A

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

13 March 2024

SCALE OF ELECTION EXPENSES

Report by the Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to note the Scale of Election Expenses for the financial year 2024/25, as shown in the Annex to this report, for the election of County Councillors and any other poll associated with the County Council during the year.**

Executive summary

2. The County Returning Officer, Martin Reeves, is responsible for the conduct of the County Council elections and by-elections. The expenditure properly incurred by the Returning Officer is paid by the Council and, as such, a scale of expenses is set as a guide to such expenditure. The scale of expenses set out in the Annex would be applicable to any by-elections held within the 2024/25 financial year.
3. In accordance with the Council's practice, a review has been undertaken in consultation with the County, City and District Council election specialists in Oxfordshire who assist the Returning Officer in running the County Council's elections and by-elections. The Districts will use this scale when acting on behalf of the Returning Officer and are generally mindful of the County Council's scale of expenses when setting their own scales of expenses, including for those election events scheduled to be held in May 2024.
4. The scale is brought to the Committee in the interests of transparency for this area of election governance.
5. The purpose of the scale of expenses is to set out the amounts that can be charged for organising and running county council elections and by-elections. In practice, this means that these are the amounts that the City and District Councils will claim back from the County Council for running elections on its behalf.

Levels for 2024-25

6. The proposed figures for 2024/25 are shown in bold alongside the amount agreed for 2023/24.

The main changes

7. The Election Specialists were mindful of the proposed Pay Bands for Elections Staff, which are due to be introduced by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) for national polls. Although there is no confirmed date for these to be introduced, the Election Specialists from the County, District and City Councils were mindful that the next Parliamentary General Election must be held within the time that this Scale of Fees will apply. It was therefore agreed that the new Scale of Fees should be set ensuring that the amounts fall in line with the proposed Pay Bands.
8. It was noted that generally, the levels of existing fees paid to election staff in Oxfordshire were lower than the proposed Pay Band figures, except for Count/Verification staff at Part IIB, Section 18 and Supervisors for the issue and receipt of postal ballots (Part IIB, Section 23), which have seen a slight reduction. Neither of these reductions were viewed as a possible cause for concern in recruiting staff to work on the count/verification process.
9. In the case of Disbursement Fees (Part IIB, Sections 10 and 11) for Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks, clarity has been added to the Scale and single fees provided, dependent on the number of elections being held on the same date. These figures again fall within the proposed Pay Bands.
10. Fees payable to Count Staff (Part IIB, Sections 15-18) have been clarified in line with the advice of Department for Levelling up, Housing & Communities. The overnight rates of pay will now be the same as for working on a Saturday. Sunday rates of pay have increased from time and a half pay, to double time.
11. As in previous years, a cost-of-living increase has been applied to some fees. For 2024/25 an approximate 5.7% lift has been applied to the flat-rate fees, based on the increase in the Oxford Living Wage.
12. The 5.7% up-lift has been applied to the Uncontested Election Fees and Disbursements (Part I, Sections 1-6) and the Fees for Contested Elections for Returning Officer and Deputy Returning Officers (Part II, Sections 7-9), in line with the NJC pay award hourly rates, as the national pay award was of fixed amount rather than a percentage base increase. These fees are not covered by the Pay Bands for poll staff.

13. All fees have been reviewed to ensure that the hourly rates reflect the Oxford Living Wage, which has been set at £12.49 per hour from April 2024.
14. The annual increases are shown as **bold** figures alongside last year's amounts. The Election Specialists at each City and District Council have confirmed that the proposed scale of fees is pragmatic for the running of elections on the County Council's behalf and is consistent with their recent experience. As such, the scale of expenses will be effective in supporting the Returning Officer in achieving a robust, resourced and cost-effective by-election should it be necessary.

Financial implications

15. Ordinarily in the year the County Council election is scheduled, it is a standalone election which means the County Council must meet the full cost. The revenue budget includes funding for an annual revenue contribution to the Council Election Reserve. The forecast balance in the reserve at the end of March 2024 is £0.6m. There is a further planned contribution of £0.2m in 2024/25 so the amount available for the 2025 County Council election will be £0.8m. It is anticipated that this would be sufficient to fund the cost of a county-only election but any additional costs which cannot be met from within revenue budgets would need to be met from General Balances.

Comments checked by: Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance
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Legal implications

16. Under the Representation of the People Act 1983 Section 36(4), the Council may set a scale of election expenses, and the annexed scheme accords with this. This responsibility rests with the Returning Officer who directly employs staff to run the County Council elections and this report is brought to the Committee to be noted for the purposes of transparency.

Comments checked by: Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance
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Equality and inclusion implications

17. The setting of a scale of expenses does not in itself involve equality and inclusion implications. However, the levels of expenses included in the scheme have been formulated to ensure that robust arrangements are in place to secure participation by candidates, staff and the public.

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Annex: Scale of Elections Fees 2024/25

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