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## **PROPOSAL TO MAKE CHANGES TO THE METHOD OF THE ANNUAL CANVASS OF ELECTORS**

### **1 SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval to the introduction of an automated telephone registration system as part of the annual canvass of electors in September 2004.

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 The present method of conducting the annual canvass of electors is by the use of a team of canvassers to hand deliver the registration forms, make a subsequent delivery to non-responders some 4-5 weeks later and finally make contact with residents of all non-responding properties by mid-October. All forms are one-piece mailers for return by post to the Elections office for bar-coding in to the computer system. This has always worked very well and the response rate at the last canvass was 99.11%.

- 2.2 Each canvasser is responsible for their area. They are required to collect the returned forms (after they have been bar-coded into the computer software) from the Elections office on a daily basis, collate the forms into register order and verify the details against the information in their workbook. At a given date they are required to return the collated forms and amended workbooks to the Elections office for checking and processing electronically onto the live register. This is a time consuming and repetitive process.

### **3. FORCES FOR CHANGE**

#### **New Government legislation**

- 3.1 The Representation of the People Regulations 2001 introduced a system of rolling registration whereby people who moved during the course of the year need not wait until the annual canvass to be registered at their new address. Although this has increased the workload throughout the year, in practice it has resulted in fewer changes at the annual canvass. It is estimated that only ¼ - ? of all forms returned at that time have changes to the pre-printed register details.
- 3.2 There is also a government requirement for electronic service delivery, which includes use of telephones if the back-office systems are automated, by 2005.

**Efficiency and Best Practice**

- 3.3 The present method of canvass as outlined above, although successful, involves duplication of work which in turn allows greater margin for error although, in practice, no errors were identified at the last internal audit carried out earlier this year.
- 3.4 There is a commitment on the part of the Council to offer a quality, cost effective service to residents and it is felt that the opportunity to register by phone on a 24-hour basis would be an easier means of accessing this service for some residents.
- 3.5 Use of such a facility will also reduce the Council's reliance on the postal service.

**4 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS**

- 4.1 The organisation Electoral Reform Services (an off-shoot of the Electoral Reform Society) offers an automated telephone response service that is available, 24 hours a day/7 days a week, to those electors wishing to notify the Council that the details on the electoral registration form have not changed. The system also allows callers to exclude members of the household from the Edited Register.
- 4.2 To gain access to the system, a household member calls the freephone number printed on the registration form. After entering their security code number (a unique reference number allocated to each property and also printed on the electoral form) the caller is asked to confirm that the details held by the Council are correct by pressing the relevant key on their telephone pad. Callers can also exclude all, none or selected members of the household from the Edited Register. The caller is asked for their date of birth as a final security measure. The Electoral Reform Services monitors and audits all responses, providing updates automatically on a twice-weekly basis to the Council's electoral registration software. The system only allows for a single completed registration per household. At the end of the telephone registration period Electoral Reform Services also provide a full audit trail of calls to enable the Elections Office to answer any enquiries as to registration details at election times.
- 4.3 At the close of the canvass for the Register that was published on 1 December 2002, the percentage of forms returned with no change (other than opting-out of the Edited Register) was 74.25%. This high figure probably reflects the introduction of "rolling registration" (i.e. monthly updates to the Electoral Register after publication) under The Representation of the People Act 2000 and The Representation of the

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People Regulations 2001. Historically, the bulk of the no-change forms in the District are returned in the first six weeks of the canvass. The potential for take-up of the system is high and, in authorities where the system has been implemented, is proven to increase year on year. Of those authorities using the system in 2002, only 5 failed to achieve a 20% participation rate. In 2003 the majority of the increased number of 108 authorities using this service have already passed a 30% return by phone, with some achieving over 60% participation, and the canvass period is not yet complete. The service is secure, with no reported problems in operation.

- 4.4 If residents do not wish to use the telephone service, forms can still be sent back in the post.
- 4.5 Electoral Reform Services can also provide an approved press release to the local media.
- 4.6 If the system is adopted, it is proposed that canvassers will still be used to hand deliver the electoral registration forms and the follow-up form to non-responding households. They will also be asked to make personal contact with all remaining non-responding properties at the final stage of the canvass as this is necessary to achieve the high response rates historically attained, which results in a highly accurate Electoral Register.
- 4.7 Elections Office staff will bar-code in the returned forms, monitor the response rates from Electoral Reform Services, input changes to the live register direct from the canvass forms, with a final check of the data input prior to publication of the register. This will eliminate the need for workbooks and filing of forms as the computer system will batch the forms into batches of 50 allowing for retrieval of a particular form, should this be necessary.
- 4.8 An early decision is necessary to allow the preliminary work of allocating unique property references to the elections software and electoral registration forms to be printed with the additional information prior to the start of the annual canvass in September 2004.

## **5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 There is a small initial charge of £520 by the electoral registration software provider for adapting the software in the first year. Subsequent years will cost £180. This can be met from existing budgets.
- 5.2 Electoral Reform Services only charge for completed registrations and only one successful registration per household on the following sliding scale, plus VAT:

Up to 5,000	@ 39p = £1,950 maximum
5,001-20,000	@ 29p = £1,450 - £5,800
20,001-30,000	@ 25p = £5,000 - £7,500
30,000+	@ 20p = £6,000 - £6,698

These charges can be absorbed by the savings made in payments to canvassers (for bookwork) and elections staff (for checking the bookwork against the forms in their own time) and in postage for the returned forms. There are no increased budgetary implications, and depending on take-up, savings are possible, particularly after the first year of implementation.

- 5.3 There were 33,489 properties in the District at the start of the canvass in September 2002.

## **6 RECOMMENDATION**

- 6.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

- (1) to introduce the system of automated telephone registration as part of the canvass conducted from September – December 2004; and
- (2) to continue with the practice of hand delivery of the electoral registration forms and the direct contact with non-responders during the final stages of the canvass to ensure the continued accuracy of the Register.

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**Background Papers:** Representation of the People Act 2000, Representation of the People Regulations 2001, correspondence from the Electoral Reform Services dated 20 March 2003 and 17 November 2003.

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