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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 the views of Members on a proposal to introduce an internet registration system as part of the annual canvass of electors in September 2006, whilst still continuing with the postal and automated telephone response systems.

### **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 2 – 3 weeks later and finally make contact with residents of all non-responding properties by the end of October. All forms are one-piece mailers for return by post to the Elections office for bar coding in and input of changes direct to the elections system.
- 2.2 For the past two years any households that have had no changes to their elector details have been able to use an automated telephone response service for their canvass return. This has proved to be popular with the electorate and has resulted in increased efficiency in the elections office at a very busy time. There were 8166 successful telephone registrations during the 2005 canvass.

### **3 FORCES FOR CHANGE**

#### **Government legislation**

- 3.1 There is a continuing requirement for electronic service delivery with proposals for e-enabled elections some time after 2006.

#### **Electoral Administration Bill 2006**

- 3.2 This Bill was introduced to Parliament in October 2005 and is expected to receive Royal Assent by the end of June 2006. A summary of the key provisions is as follows:-
- a provision for personal identifiers for absent voters to act as a deterrent for fraud. This new provision will require absent voters (both postal and proxy) to provide their signature and date of birth on their absent vote application and, in the case of postal and postal proxy voters, also on the postal voting statement (this is the document that will replace the current Declaration of Identity) so that the identifiers can be cross-checked. If they do not match then their accompanying ballot paper will be rejected from the count. This has important

implications for the count process and the holding of same-day election counts;

- a new duty on registration officers to take all necessary steps to ensure comprehensive registers;
- moving back the last date for registration, enabling people to register to vote after an election has been called;
- providing for pre-poll information to be sent to all electors, including those on the postal vote list, with details about their vote;
- providing anonymous registration to electors who meet certain criteria showing that their safety might be at risk if their name and address were published on the register;
- printing new security marks on ballot papers, including barcodes as well as serial numbers and a watermark or under printing instead of the perforation;
- conducting reviews of polling places every 4 years to ensure they meet accessibility criteria;
- requiring voters to sign for their ballot paper at the polling station to act as a deterrent to fraud;
- In addition the House of Lords has introduced an amendment to the Bill to provide for the replacement of the current household registration by a system of individual registration for electors, with a requirement for individual signatures and dates of birth to be provided as a security measure. If approved, this would not be introduced until 2007.

3.3 In recognition of the resource implications these measures would impose on local authorities, the government has provided a grant to all councils in England and Wales in 2006/07 as part of the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services block of the Revenue Support Grant. The amount equates to 24p per elector and will also be funded in the Budget year 2007/08.

3.4 Once the Bill has received Royal Assent the detailed implications will have to be assessed, such as the potential need for portable scanners/readers etc., linked to the elections software system, at the count station (with suitable IT support) and a further report brought to Members on the financial implications as appropriate.

#### **Efficiency and Best Practice**

3.5 The Council is committed to providing quality cost effective services and has already provided residents with a number of services on-line including the ability to pay their council tax on-line, to order and pay for a parking permit and

to look at planning applications whilst still allowing those who wish to do so, to use more traditional methods. The aim of this report is to provide the elector with more choice by offering an internet registration system in conjunction with the other two methods mentioned above.

#### **4 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS**

- 4.1 Electoral Reform Services are the service providers for our automated telephone response and they also offer an internet registration system. Their 24 hours a day, 7 days a week electronic systems will conform to level AA accessibility, which will enable any elector with sight impairment or physical disabilities to register by internet provided that there are no changes to their details. Both systems also allow registrants to exclude members of the household from the Edited Register and request a postal vote.
- 4.2 This is a tried and tested system used by 8 local authorities in Essex and 132 councils nationally. To gain access to the system, a household member logs on to the web page link provided and enters the unique two-part security code provided by Electoral Reform Services and printed on the registration form. The elector is asked to provide his/her postcode and name for security purposes and after they have completed their registration they are told whether it has been successful.

#### **5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Electoral Reform Services make an initial set-up charge of £300, with a £250 charge for subsequent years, plus a charge for successful registrations (only one successful registration per household is allowable) on the following sliding scale:

up to 20,000 completed registrations	@ 25p
20,001 – 40,000 completed registrations	@ 22p
40,001 – 60,000 completed registrations	@ 20p
over 60,000 completed registrations	@ 16p

Based on the previous experience of other councils, Electoral Reform Services estimate the likely take up to be 20% of the telephone returns and therefore the anticipated cost to the Council is 1633 registrations (£408.25).

This is partially absorbed by the savings made in postage for the returned forms and the remainder can be met within existing budgets.

**6 RECOMMENDATION**

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

to introduce the system of internet registration as part of the canvass conducted from September – December 2006 in addition to the telephone registration and traditional postal returns and to continue with the practice of 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:-**

News releases from Department of Constitutional Affairs

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