

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/113/2005-6.
Date of meeting: 6 February 2006.



Portfolio: People First.

Subject: Electoral Administration Bill.

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Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 - 56 4470).

Recommendation:

That a CSB growth bid for 2006/7 in the sum of £20,000 be substituted for the listed item of £2,000 in respect of the implementation of the Electoral Administration Bill and Regulations which are currently before Parliament prior to the May 2006 elections.

Report:

1. The Electoral Administration Bill and Regulations are currently in passage to legislation in Parliament. The Government plans to make the Bill and Regulations law prior to the May 2006 elections.
2. The Bill and Regulations currently provide for the following key changes in the electoral process:
 - (a) extension of polling day hours from 7.00 a.m. until 10.00 p.m. for all elections;
 - (b) the receipt of all postal and proxy votes to be confirmed in writing;
 - (c) changes to the annual canvass of electors and in particular, to meet the transfer to the Electoral Registration Officer of duties concerning the return of electoral registration forms.
3. The Government recognised before Christmas that this would add to the costs incurred by Returning Officers/Registration Officers on behalf of Councils in implementing the new legal requirements. The Government has therefore included in the Council's provisional grant settlement for 2006/7 a sum of £20,000 for this purpose. This sum has been notified only within the last few days.
4. The Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA) has stressed that Returning Officers need to ensure that this element of the Government grant should be earmarked for the purpose intended in Council budgets. It was anticipated that additional costs would be incurred as a result of the Bill becoming law and a sum of £2,000 included in the growth list. However, in view of the strictures of the DCA about proper use of funding, the sum of £20,000 needs to be substituted as part of the revised budget.
5. There are two uncertainties about the figure of £20,000:
 - (a) the final grant settlement by the Government could change the allocation to these costs; and

- (b) the Bill may be subject to change as it progresses through Parliament.
6. However, all the features of the Bill are expected to become law and it is likely that the earmarked sum will be required. The principal additional costs will arise as follows:
- (a) fees for polling station staff need to be revised to take account of the longer day for all future elections;
 - (b) additional administration and postage costs to comply with the written receipt of all postal and proxy vote applications; and
 - (c) changes to the method of carrying out the annual canvass of electors in particular increases in administration costs to comply with the new duties placed on the Electoral Registration Officer to ensure that 'A' forms are returned.

Statement in Support of Recommended Action:

7. As the Government has made specific provision in the provisional grant settlement for the cost of implementing the Bill, the sum should be shown in the electoral budget. This will meet the DCA's requirement that this grant provision is not utilised for other purposes.

Options for Action:

8. Aside from the preferred decision set out in the recommendation, the other option which could be considered, namely to leave the CSB growth item at its present level (£2,000) and update the actual costs after the May elections as a supplementary estimate.
9. This may be an untidy process and it may be preferable to ensure that the budget for 2006/7 reflects the actual position from the outset.

Consultation Undertaken:

10. Head of Finance, Department of Constitutional Affairs and previously discussed with the Standing Scrutiny Panel on Constitutional Affairs.

Resource Implications:

Budget provision: Nil (CSB growth bid of £2,000 already submitted).

Personnel: Nil.

Land: Nil.

Community Plan/BVPP reference: People First.

Relevant Statutory Power: Electoral Administration Bill and Regulations (where enacted).

Background Papers: DCA letter – December 2005.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act: Many of the measures contained in the Bill relates to human rights issues of electors.

Key Decision Reference (if required): Nil.