

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/083/2006-07.

Date of meeting: 18 December 2006.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Finance, Performance Management & Corporate Support Services.

Subject: Xpress Elections Management System - Postal Vote Personal Identifiers.

Officer contact for further information: Ian Willett (01992 - 564243).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 - 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That approval be given to the purchase of the Postal Vote Personal Identifiers upgrade to the Xpress Electoral Register and Election Management IT system;**
- (2) That approval be given under Contract Standing Order C1(4) to the waiving of Contract Standing Order C4(2) which requires two quotations to be obtained for a contract of this value on the grounds that Xpress is the currently contracted supplier of the elections software and there would be no genuine competition;**
- (3) That the capital cost of the software upgrade (£11,400) and provision of two scanners (£4,000) be funded from the General Information Technology Fund allocation for software upgrades for the current financial year; and**
- (4) That the revenue costs of the software upgrade and the two scanners (£2,500 per annum) be funded by means of a CSB growth bid for 2007/8.**

Report:

1. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 has made a series of changes to the arrangements for managing elections and compiling the electoral register. These changes will be set out in detail in Government regulations in the next few weeks.
2. This report deals with new proposals relating to postal voting. The Act requires all postal voters (including proxies) at elections to provide their signature and date of birth on a postal voting statement and return this with their postal ballot paper. Without a signature and date of birth, a postal ballot paper will not be valid.
3. The Act also requires that the postal voting statement is checked against the identifier on the postal vote application form. Providing false information for purpose of obtaining a postal or proxy vote becomes a criminal offence.
4. The process of carrying out the verification process can be carried out electronically by means of an upgrade to the Council's Xpress elections system. This upgrade will:
 - (a) generate forms in the statutory format;
 - (b) store data;
 - (c) compare electronically the scanned data.

5. In order to maximise the effectiveness of the system two new electronic scanners are necessary. One is to replace the existing machine which is probably reaching the end of its life. A second machine is desirable (a) to back up the first scanner and (b) allow a scanner to be set up at the election count to deal with postal votes arriving during polling day.

6. The capital cost of the software and two scanners can be funded from the ICT capital budget. The revenue costs will require a CSB growth item in the appropriate sum. It should be borne in mind that in subsequent years, a proportion of these revenue costs will be met by Government (general and European elections), the County Council and Parish/Town Councils when those elections are held concurrently with District wards.

7. Under contract standing orders, a contract of this value (software) would require the Returning Officer to obtain two quotations. However, as the Council is contracted with Xpress, there is little opportunity for competitive quotes. With this in mind, approval is sought to waive the requirement to obtain two quotations.

8. An expression of interest has been registered with Xpress. No order will be placed until the capital costs have been approved.

Statement in Support of Recommended Action:

9. Personal identifier comparisons are a statutory requirement. The Returning Officer must therefore have arrangements in place by the elections in May 2007. The upgrade to the Xpress system is designed to achieve this.

Other Options for Action:

10. The only alternative to electronic identifier comparisons is for a manual check to take place. This is labour intensive and, with up to 5,000 postal votes possible, could not be achieved without additional temporary staffing. This will not be without cost.

Consultation undertaken:

11. Leader of Council; Customer Services, Media, Communications and ICT Portfolio Holder; Head of ICT.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: Capital cost from existing ICT capital budget. No CSB provision for revenue costs.

Personnel: From existing resources.

Land: Nil.

Community Plan/BVPP reference: N/A.

Relevant statutory powers: Electoral Services Act 2006 (Part 6 and Schedule 1).

Background papers: None.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: The security aspects of the upgrade will meet Data Protection Act requirements so as to protect the human rights of postal voters.

Key Decision reference (if required): None.