

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET – 5 NOVEMBER 2008

NEGOTIATED PROCUREMENT FOR PURCHASING ELECTION SOFTWARE FOR CHECKING PERSONAL IDENTIFIERS FOR ABSENT VOTERS IN FUTURE ELECTIONS

Report by Depute Chief Executive/Executive Director of Corporate Support

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1** To seek Cabinet approval for the negotiated purchase of a software package to implement absent voting identifiers in Scotland.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** Following on from the Electoral Administration Act 2006, secondary legislation has been passed by the UK Parliament to require Electoral Registration Officers in Scotland to collect personal identifiers for all absent voters from 8 February 2008.
- 2.2** From 8 August 2008, Returning Officers in Scotland are required to check identifiers on returned postal voting statements at UK, Scottish and European Parliamentary Elections. It is understood that the Scottish Government intends to introduce equivalent legislation for personal identifiers at Scottish Local Government Elections at the end of 2008.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW LEGISLATION

- 3.1** The identifiers prescribed for absent voting in Scotland are the Elector's signature and their date of birth.
- 3.2** Along with a record of all electors who vote by post, proxy or postal proxy, Electoral Registration Officers are now required to maintain a record containing each elector's name, a specimen of their signature and a record of their date of birth. The only exception to the recording of the signature is where the Electoral Registration Officer has agreed to a waiver, in which case a record of the waiver must then be kept.
- 3.3** The legislation requires the Returning Officer to be satisfied that the postal voting statement is duly completed, and as part of that process, the Returning Officer must compare the date of birth and the signature on the postal voting statement against the date of birth and the signature contained in the personal identifier record i.e. that information held by the Electoral Registration Officer.

3.4 The introduction of this new requirement in Scotland will have a major impact on the administration of absent voting. Election stationery, including postal voting statements will have to be revised to comply with legislation. Postal voting processes will be reviewed, together with staffing levels and training. Arrangements are underway and initial meetings have taken place with software and election stationery company representatives. In terms of verifying postal voter personal identifiers, the Returning Officer must set aside a minimal of 20% of the envelopes in each postal voter's ballot box. The Electoral Commission strongly believe that 100% personal identifier verification is preferred as it results in every postal ballot being treated equally and results in a single administrative process rather than two separate processes being operated simultaneously.

3.5 As at 1 September 2008 there were 10,179 registered postal voters within East Ayrshire.

4. PROPOSED PURCHASE OF SOFTWARE TO SUPPORT THE NEW LEGISLATION

4.1 Meetings have been held between representatives of the three Ayrshire authorities and the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board in terms of issues surrounding the implications of the new legislation.

4.2 To support Returning Officers in implementing the new legislation, Computershare Electoral Management Services Ltd. have developed the SelCheck Software System which electronically checks personal identifiers. The SelCheck System has been used successfully by over 80 English Councils in May 2007 to carry out 100% checks, some with more than 60,000 absent voters.

4.3 The Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board already operates an Electoral Registration System by Computershare, which would integrate with the SelCheck System in terms of effectively processing personal identifiers within East Ayrshire.

4.4 Features of the SelCheck System are as follows:

- Signature and Date of Birth Collection – Fully functional on board scanning features to cover postal vote applications, challenges to existing postal voters and security statements;
- Automated Verification – Signatures are compared and verified automatically using technology developed from banking systems. Applications and declarations can both be checked automatically;
- Date of Birth Extraction – Dates of birth are extracted and stored from the image and compared as part of the automated verification process;
- Review Failures – Simple visual interface to check any rejected signatures, including Returning Officers review area;

- Fraud Controls – Features that allow you to look beyond basic checks and make comparisons of all voters signatures from single properties, complete streets and polling districts;
- Reporting – A comprehensive array of reports, graphs and statistics, to meet the demands of any reporting process required;
- Word Processing – The system is interfaced to Microsoft Word for form design and production of letter runs;
- Data Import – SelCheck is independent of any Electoral Registration System and can receive data from a variety of sources to facilitate easy initial set up;
- CORE Compliant (Co-ordinated On-line Record of Electors) – Data can be received using the latest CORE/EML (Election Mark-up Language) exports;
- For the Future – The system is already capable of storing photographs as well as signatures and can be used to produce chipped and secure identity cards for voters.

4.5 There are significant benefits in the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board and the three Ayrshire authorities utilising the same software and processes for the checking of personal identifiers. Different operating systems, although potentially feasible, would involve more complicated work processes as files transferred from Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board would require work to crop data for scanning purposes.

4.6 The company had also offered a 14% discount as a result of the three Ayrshire authorities purchasing the new system.

5. PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Council's Standing Orders relating to contracts (paragraph 20 (1)) states that; "Where the appropriate Executive Director/Executive Head of Service/Head of Service considers that a tender should be negotiated with one person, he/she shall, before entering into negotiations, obtain the approval of the Cabinet, both in respect of the negotiation and of the person with whom the tender is to be negotiated, stating the reasons for the proposed negotiated procurement route".

5.2 As outlined above, the main reason for negotiating with Computershare Electoral Management Services Ltd. is to establish an integrated system with the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board to implement effectively and efficiently, the new absent voting identifiers provisions within East Ayrshire.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1** The cost of purchasing the SelCheck System would be £10,500 for each authority with an annual charge of £4,000. Finance has been provided by the Scotland Office to meet the requirements of introducing a number of new provisions under the Electoral Administration Act 2006 up to and including financial year 2009/10. If no further funding is forthcoming from the Scotland Office, the annual charge will require to be met from service budgets.

7. LEGAL AUTHORITY

- 7.2** The Electoral Administration Act 2006, the Local Electoral Administration and Registration Services (Scotland) Act 2006 and the Absent Voting (Transitional) Provisions (Scotland) Regulations 2008, Representation of the People (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2008, and the Scottish Parliament (Elections Etc.) (Amendment) Order 2008, place a responsibility on Returning Officers for the introduction of new provisions in terms of absent voting with particular focus on checking personal identifiers on returned postal voting statements at UK, Scottish and European Parliamentary Elections.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 8.1** Failure to secure a system that integrates with the existing system operated by the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board could impact on the efficient processing of postal votes at Elections. Failure to secure a proven electoral management system, such as SelCheck, will prejudice the Returning Officer's ability to carry out successful checks of personal identifiers and could have a significant detrimental impact on the successful administration of future elections.

9. COMMUNITY PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1** Nil

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1** It is recommended that the Cabinet:
- (i) approves the negotiation of the purchase of the SelCheck Software System from Computershare Electoral Management Services Ltd. in accordance with paragraph 20(1) of the Council's Standing Orders relating to contracts; and
 - (ii) otherwise note the contents of the report.

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17 October 2008

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Information on the SelCheck Software.
2. Electoral Commission Circulars EC06/2008 and EC21/2008

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers relative to this report should contact Julie McGarry, Administration Manager on Tel No (01563) 576147. Any person wishing further information on this report should contact Bill Walkinshaw, Head of Democratic Services on Tel No (01563) 576135.

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