

# ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

## REPORT TO AND DECISION OF THE CORPORATE SUPPORT COMMITTEE ON 23 NOVEMBER 2021

**SUBJECT:** Provision of Digital Polling Equipment and Software for use in Polling Stations at Future Elections

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Request for the Corporate Support Committee's approval for the Council to enter into a formal contract for the provision of digital polling equipment and software for future elections.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee is requested to:

- a) agree that the Council can enter into a three year Contract for the provision of Modern Polling with Modern Democracy Ltd; and
- b) note the virement of £72k to fund the contract from current year underspends.

### BACKGROUND

#### Trial use of iPads in May 2021

At the elections in May 2021 iPads were used to manage the issue of ballot papers and complete a number of administrative tasks normally carried out by presiding officers and the core elections team. Both staff and electors commented on how easy the process was and many electors were very happy to see this more modern digital approach.

- iPads were used instead of paper registers and these can be updated remotely by the core election team at any point during polling day;
- The use of iPads reduced the risk of error on the part of poll staff particularly in terms of the marking of the register and issuing the correct ballot papers. An error was identified on the day in six polling stations, but this was found to be a problem

with the format of the data produced from the election management system and now identified will not happen again;

- The process was quicker and easier for the voter particularly where multiple polls were taking place at the same time and where they brought their poll card with a QR code that can be read by the iPad;
- The iPads provided real time information about voter turnout remotely to the core election team throughout polling day, this functionality was not shared with any political parties during our trial, but this can be done in the future;
- The iPads carried out the reconciliation which previously needed to be done by the Presiding Officer at the end of the day at the polling station and sent this directly to the core election team;
- The system provides digital marked registers so that registers do not need to be scanned and once purchased can be interrogated digitally by those entitled to this information

### Benefits of using iPads

The Cabinet Office refunds a number of election costs incurred by local authorities. It does not yet refund the cost of a digital system, although there is an expectation that this will happen with the commitment to introduce more robust voter Identification (ID) processes. Voter ID functionality for this system is already developed and has been tested in national trials. Whilst it would be included in this contract it will only be included in later contracts for other authorities at an additional charge. The Government has announced that Voter ID is due to be introduced from September 2022 ready for the next parliamentary elections in 2024 (or sooner).

The providers of the software have been working with and accredited by the Cabinet Office. They are also likely to be included in the Electoral Commission 'Designing effective electoral services toolkit' which will be part of the framework and guidance provided to local authorities in future elections. This includes directions we must follow, guidance we should consider and best practice. The opportunity to influence this at an early stage will be invaluable.

There will be savings in the numbers of staff needed at polling stations. It is estimated that in 'normal' circumstances' (ie where extra staff are not needed for cleaning etc as during covid) we will likely save at least one member of staff per polling station. If we were to reduce staffing by a minimum of 50 Poll Clerks, we would currently save around £10,000 with oncosts. But it is likely that we could increase these savings further moving forward. As stated earlier we anticipate that the Cabinet Office will recognise the need to fund more modern working methods at elections in the future.

There will be a number of other savings in administrative time and costs for the core elections team and a reduction in risk due to potential human error at a number of stages of the election. Any risk is a potential cost to the council both in reputation and financially.

The costs of elections to the council vary depending on what the election is and what can be claimed back from other authorities, it is therefore not possible to be precise about the impact the use of iPads and a new process will have on overall election costs. But going forward we anticipate a minimum of £10-15k savings at each major election date.

This product is not currently available from any other supplier and a three-year contract is being offered to us as 'early adopters' and full participants in the user focus group. Future contracts which include voter ID functionality will be at a higher cost to those councils not already using them. A three-year contract will cover local elections in 2023 and parliamentary elections in 2024. Arun generally has around 2-3 by-elections and/or Neighbourhood Plan Referendums per year where the tablets could also be used.

The early adoption of the system is essential for the future effective delivery of elections.

**2. PROPOSAL(S):**

- a) That the Corporate Support Committee agrees the Council can enter into a three year Contract for the provision of Modern Polling with Modern Democracy Ltd
- b) To note the virement of £72k to fund the contract from current year underspends.

**3. OPTIONS:**

- I. To enter into three-year contract for digital polling equipment and software for use in polling stations, improving efficiency, service delivered and potentially reducing costs for future elections
- II. Not to let the contract and continue with all manual processes without the advantages covered in this paper and with the risk that it will be difficult to enter into a similar contract at potentially short notice when it is required in the future. Experience and capacity is likely to be an issue in the market place for future providers

**4. CONSULTATION:**

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		X
Relevant District Ward Councillors		X
Other groups/persons (please specify)		X

<b>5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)</b>	YES	NO
Financial	X	
Legal		X
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		X

Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		X
Sustainability		X
Asset Management/Property/Land – slow down progress on key sites		X
Technology		X
Other (please explain)		X

**6. IMPLICATIONS:**

Financial:

The contract is a three year contract at a cost of £72,450. By entering into the contract, the Council will be committing itself to expenditure which is not in the original budget. The report points out that the level of the efficiencies cannot be quantified fully at this point and the Government funding is not guaranteed. However, the full contract sum can be met from current year underspends.

**7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:**

So that the Council can enter into a contract for digital support in administering future elections, which will include voter ID functionality, improve efficiency and deliver a better service to voters and candidates.

Our Procurement team have confirmed that there is no other comparable product on the market.

Voter ID is due to be introduced by the Government from September 2022 ready for the next planned Parliamentary Elections in 2024.

**8. BACKGROUND PAPERS: None**