

City of Westminster

Committee: General Purposes (Urgency) Sub-Committee	Date: 20 February 2002	Title of Report: City Council Elections: May 2002
Classification: For General Release	Report of: Director of Legal and Administrative Services	
Wards involved:	All	
Policy context:	Not applicable	
Financial Summary:	Budget provision in the Business Plan for the City Council Elections in May 2002 is currently £145,000	

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks a decision from the Sub-Committee on three possible alternative suppliers of electronic count equipment at the City Council elections on 2nd May 2002.
- 1.2 The Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) has approved both of the City Council's applications for electoral pilots at the forthcoming elections: (a) a central electronic count and (b) extended polling hours.
- 1.3 The further approval of the DTLR is required to the detailed arrangements and costings of the electronic pilot.
- 1.4 The report also informs the Sub-Committee of the designation of a few alternative polling places at these elections as a result of building works at a number of the previously designated polling places.

2. Recommendations

- (1) That the Sub-Committee decides if it wishes the supplier of the electronic count equipment to be:
 - (a) election.com (wand reader)
 - (b) ES&S (optical scanner)
 - (c) DRS (optical scanner)
- (2) That the officers be authorised to conclude the detailed arrangements, any changes required to regulations and the final costing with the preferred supplier for submission to and approval by the DTLR.
- (3) That the Committee notes the remainder of the report including the fall back option of a manual count.

3. Electoral Pilots

- 3.1 At its meeting on 11th December, 2001 the General Purposes Committee unanimously agreed to make an application to the DTLR to participate in two electoral pilots at the City Council elections on 2nd May 2002:
 - (a) extended polling hours: 7a.m to 10 p.m. in line with the hours for parliamentary elections
 - (b) electronic counting: a central electronic count, subject to a further report in February so that the Committee can be satisfied on the DTLR's response to the application and other detailed arrangements, including costs.
- 3.2 Westminster's applications were approved by the DTLR on 5th February 2002. Westminster is one of 30 local authorities approved to conduct pilots, but is the only authority combining extended polling hours with a central electronic count.
- 3.3 The DTLR have conducted a separate tendering exercise with the suppliers of technical equipment for e-voting and e-counting pilots as the DTLR will be meting the costs attributable to providing the equipment for these pilots. All three suppliers that have submitted proposals for an electronic count in Westminster are DTLR approved suppliers.
- 3.4 The DTLR will also be issuing Regulations to govern any changes to electoral procedures, including to provide for the longer polling hours and to allow for the implications of counting ballot papers electronically rather than by hand.
- 3.5 In the event of no satisfactory agreement being reached with the preferred supplier or the DTLR, then the fallback option will be to revert to a traditional manual count.
- 3.6 The suppliers were requested to submit proposals on the basis that as the start of the count would be delayed by one hour due to extended voting

hours, the target time for completing the count should be within 2 hours. Close of poll would be at 10 p.m. and time has to be allowed to transport the ballot papers to the count venue. After a lead in period of up to one hour (by which time all the ballot papers would be received and ready to be counted), the counting machines should then have a sufficient supply of ballot papers to keep them fully operational and so enable the count to be completed by 1 a.m.

- 3.7 A presentation by the three suppliers was made to members of the General Purposes Committee on Monday 11th February 2002 to demonstrate how the different equipment operates.

4. Options

(a) election. com

- 4.1 election.com is a supplier of wand scanners (bar code readers) and optical scanners. The company's recommended solution for Westminster was to use wand scanners. All the ballot papers would be printed with a unique bar code against the name of each candidate. The ballot papers would look different in appearance to the voter as there would be a bar code printed against the name of each candidate.
- 4.2 At the count each individual vote on a ballot paper would then be individually read by the wand (i.e. up to three votes per ballot paper). The count process would be similar to a manual count in that each vote would be counted in front of counting agents and so transparent. Votes would be counted in batches of 25. All doubtfuls would be separated and adjudicated in the usual way.
- 4.3 Each bar code reader would be attached to a PC and both would be operated by a pair of count staff. The suppliers estimated for up to 40 wands and PCs for the 20 wards, i.e. two scanners and PCs per ward. Votes would be totalled in batches on the individual PCs and then combined manually to give the result for each ward. Wards would be counted at separately designated tables as at a manual count.

(b) ES&S

- 4.4 ES&S has been providing electronic voting and counting equipment for a significant number of states at US elections for many years. ES&S would provide up to 6 Model 550 optical scanners. These have been in use for some years and so are not of recent design, but they are tried and tested. In appearance they are similar to a large photocopier. The machines would be imported from the USA as would the metal ballot boxes that have been designed to accompany them. These are to keep the ballot papers flat and so help to minimise the possibility of folded ballot papers jamming the machinery.
- 4.5 The ballot papers will be similar in appearance to those used at the GLA elections with tracking marks down the side of the ballot paper which the scanner uses to position and read the votes. The ballot papers have to be fed

into the machine facing upwards and all in the same direction. One corner has a different rounded shape to make this easy to identify visually so that the ballot papers can be sorted as they are taken out of the ballot boxes and piled up ready to be counted.

- 4.6 Programming of the machines can be varied so that they can either count or outsort blank or “under votes” (i.e. any ballot paper on which a voter hasn’t used their full entitlement to three votes). Any doubtful votes are automatically outsorted for adjudication. The adjudication procedure would be the same as in a manual count. The machine has only one hopper so stops each time a ballot paper is outsorted. The machine operator then removes that ballot paper from the pile for adjudication and restarts the machine.
- 4.7 At the end of each batch the data and the tally of votes is transferred onto a disk which is removed from the machine and taken to a central count reconciliation PC. A new disk is loaded and the scanner then counts the next batch and so on until all the ballot papers are counted.
- 4.8 The machine can only read marks in the defined voting area of the ballot paper. Any votes or marks outside this area cannot be read. The machines are not networked and will count any batch of ballot papers.

(c) DRS

- 4.9 Essentially DRS provides a completely integrated electronic count process in which all votes can be recorded electronically. The system also records the ballot paper returns from the polling places (registration), the scanners read the ballot papers (reading), the result is checked against the ballot paper account (verification), unscanned ballot papers and decisions on doubtfuls are recorded (adjudication) and the results recorded (consolidation).
- 4.10 DRS supplied the counting equipment at the GLA elections in May 2000. Westminster was the lead Borough for the West Central constituency at the GLA elections and also participated in the count rehearsal at which the count equipment was tested, so staff are familiar with the equipment and the process. There were technical difficulties at the GLA counts on the night with scanners out of action or counting more slowly than was anticipated. The results were much slower in being declared than everyone was led to expect. Based on the experience of the rehearsal Westminster did lobby for more scanners in the belief that the allocation specified by GOL would not be sufficient – which in the event turned out to be the case.
- 4.11 The scanners that DRS propose to supply are an upgraded version of those used at the last GLA elections and will incorporate some new features that are designed to speed up the count process. They are lighter and less robust than the ES&S scanners.
- 4.12 The DRS optical scanners to be used in May will have a more sophisticated reading technology than in 2000. This also means that the ballot paper can now be printed to look virtually identical to a traditional style ballot paper. The only difference to a traditional ballot paper is the printing of one bar code at the top of the ballot paper and on the back. This is the unique bar code for that particular ballot paper.

- 4.13 It is proposed to have 12 scanners (+ one spare that will also be put to use) as the scanners are slower than the ES&S model. This number is the same as at the GLA Election when the scanners were counting 2 ballot papers (with up to two votes on each) from 3 Boroughs. Any scanner can count any batch of ballot papers.
- 4.14 Each scanner will also have a PC attached to it. There will also be a number of other PCs all of which will be networked together. Any of the PCS can undertake any of the stages within the count so their use can be optimised.
- 4.15 The other new features of the DRS system from the 2000 elections are as follows:
- (a) reusable ballot boxes (instead of disposable plastic boxes)
 - (b) only those ballot papers that cannot be read at all by the scanner will be outsourced (whilst the scanner continues counting)
 - (c) the scanners will take an image of any ballot paper that is blank, has marks outside the voting area or is otherwise doubtful and requires adjudication. These images can then be read on a PC screen and the decision recorded electronically
 - (d) a batch of ballot papers can be kept together throughout the whole count process

5. Staffing Implications

- 5.1 The more sophisticated the electronic system the fewer count staff are required, although the training requirements are much higher. On balance the staffing costs to be met by the City Council will not be significantly different than for a manual count. Staff will be available to conduct a manual count of any ward if necessary.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 The cost of an electronic count increases with the sophistication of the equipment. The DTLR have set aside a budget to meet the equipment costs of e-voting and e-counting pilots. The three suppliers have been approved by the DTLR and it is therefore anticipated that as Westminster's pilot application has been approved by the DTLR on the basis of conducting an accurate and quick count, approval will also be forthcoming to a joint proposal between the City Council and one of the three suppliers. The final costings will be dependent on the detailed arrangements agreed with the preferred supplier.
- 6.2 Circulated separately to members (see report at Agenda Item 8) is an order of costs for the three options. This information and costing is commercially sensitive and therefore is exempt information under category 7 of the Access to Information provisions of the Local Government Act 1972 (Schedule 12A).

7. Designation of Polling Places

7.1 A number of previously designated polling places will not be available on the 2nd May mainly due to building works. The following alternatives have been designated as a temporary alternative for the forthcoming City Council elections. The intention is to revert to the previously designated location at the next election and thereafter:

	Previously Designated	Temporary Alternative
Church Street (CSC)	Lisson Grove Estate Hall	Gateway School (joint with CSA. This was the polling place before for CSC)
Hyde Park (HPA)	St James's Church	Paddington Station Eastbourne Terrace Entrance
Queen's Park (QPC)	Avenues Youth Club	Queen's Park School (a polling place before)
Vincent Square (VSB)	Napier Hall	Burdett-Coutts School (a polling place before)

If you have any queries about this report or wish to inspect one of the background papers please contact Nigel Tonkin on

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Background Papers

1. DTLR "Modernising Democracy Prospectus for Electoral Pilots – Local elections 2002"
2. LGA "Elections – the 21st century model: an evaluation of May 2000 electoral pilots"