

By: Alex King – Deputy Leader
Peter Sass – Head of Democratic Services and Local Leadership

To: Selection and Member Services Committee – 13 March 2009

Subject: CHANGING COUNCIL GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS – MAYORS
AND INDIRECTLY ELECTED LEADERS – **ADDENDUM**

Classification: Unrestricted

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Summary: The Deputy Leader has requested information on the cost of e-petitioning to be made available to the Committee.

ADDENDUM

The Cost of e-petitioning

1. The cost of installing a simple petition site is in the region of £5,000. This figure would, however increase in proportion to any steps taken to achieve site security.
2. The signatures would need to be verified in order to avoid the potential for legal challenges arising from fraudulence, duplication or ineligible signatures. Voters would need to be checked off against the electoral roll. The Head of ICT Commissioning has been asked to identify whether this can be achieved electronically. He is currently researching the options available but had advised that, in his opinion, the absence of a National Identity Card means that there is no readily available method of achieving complete electronic security whilst ensuring that e.petitioning achieves its aim of providing a sufficiently flexible option for people to express their views. If, for example, e.petitioning were to involve the incorporation of the most obvious hidden identifiers such as a National Insurance Number or Electoral Roll Number, the process itself would become far more complicated than simply signing the paper petition. It would equally not be practical to attempt to identify the number of signatures emanating from a particular e.mail address as this would ignore the simple explanation that all members of a family and their friends had voted from that personal computer and would also preclude people from using their local Library for the purpose.
3. Public-I (the current providers of the webcasting system) have provided sites to other Local Authorities which are compliant with Government Guidance on Referendums and have confirmed that KCC would be able to utilise their e-petitioning system as part of the current contract. However, this system does not contain any of the additional features described in the previous paragraph. The Head of Democratic Services and Local Leadership has not to date been able to identify any other Local Authority that has an e.petitioning site that goes beyond this Guidance.
4. It seems likely that the most effective means of checking will be *after* the closing date for petitioning. This would allow electronic signatures to be checked off against the electoral role in exactly the same way as paper signatures. In all

probability this work would need to be undertaken by the Boroughs and Districts (as only they would have access to the unexpurgated electoral roll). The Head of Registration and Coroners estimates that the fee paid to each District for undertaking this task would be £2 per elector, giving a total in the region of £120k.

The Cost of a Referendum

5. The Head of Registration and Coroners has estimated that the cost of running a referendum on its own would be £1.2 million (£100k for each of the 12 Districts). He bases this ball park figure on the grounds that the referendum would follow the same principles as an election. If this were the case, there would need to be polling stations (open from 7am to 10pm), polling staff, ballot papers and counts.

6. The Head of Registration and Coroners advises that savings would be made if there were only one count and/or shorter polling hours.

7. Parliament has over the past few years arranged for elections to be timed so that they coincide with one another. This year's Local Government and European elections are the latest example of such practice. There are therefore some grounds for optimism that similar resource savings might occur in the event that a Referendum needs to take place. This has, however, not happened to date in any of the 38 Referendums that have been held in England and Wales since 2001.

The Total Estimated Cost

8. Assuming that a petitioning site is set up, that the checking of signatures against the electoral roll is undertaken by the Districts and that the subsequent referendum is held on its own, the total cost to Kent County Council would be in the region of £1.325 million.

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Background Documents
None.