LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

Meeting of the General Purposes Committee
24th February 2005

Report from the Democratic Services Manager

For information	Wards affected: All Wards

Report Title: Election Alert System

1.0 Summary

1.1 This report outlines the proposal from Democratic Services to create an e-mail and text message alert system to provide members of the public with information in the run up to the general election.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 That this report be noted and agreed.

3.0 Detail

3.1 In the run up to any election there are a number of important dates and deadlines that effect whether and how people can take part in the election. For example there is a deadline for registering to vote and for applying for a postal or proxy vote. There are also useful information releases during these weeks, including the confirmed date and time of the election and the list of candidates who are standing in a particular constituency. Traditionally it can be difficult to get this information out to the general public due to both time and budgetary constraints. This project is designed to help us publicise this information more widely than has historically been possible and also to target younger voters who are less likely to pick up this information in other ways.

3.2 The way the system would work is quite simple. A resident would register on the system, either through the e-alerts page on the website

if they would like to receive e-mail alerts, or by texting to a special phone number if they would like to receive text message alerts.

3.3   The details would be automatically collected and stored by the relevant systems. At appropriate times during the run up to the election we would then provide updated information and deadline reminders. At the end of the polling day we would also send out the final results for our constituencies.

3.4   The following is a guide list of possible alerts:

- Welcome and Introduction
- Launch of our General Election webpages
- Updates to our General Election webpages (e-mail only)
- Date (and time) of the election agreed
- Reminder of how to register to vote, the deadline and how to check that you are on the register
- Instructions on how to apply (or cancel) a postal or proxy vote and the deadline for applications
- (possibly) deadline for applying to be a candidate
- Deadline to register to vote has passed
- List of candidates for the relevant constituency
- Deadline for postal/proxy votes has passed
- Reminder of polling date and time (with polling station details?)
- A summary of vote guidelines (e.g. vote once for one candidate or vote for up to three different candidates)
- Reminder near the close of poll on the day
- Final Results and thanks for voting

3.6   Once the election has been completed the system could be retained for use by Electoral Services to remind residents about the yearly electoral registration canvas and also for any unexpected elections in the future, or we could close the system and re-open it in time for the local elections in 2006.

3.7   The Council already runs an e-mail alert system and a text message system is currently being developed. It is proposed to make use of these two systems. They can be combined so that messages sent out in one system automatically appear in the other system. By this method we are aiming to combine the two to provide both e-mail and text message options for those who wish to be provided with alerts. However, as it is cheaper to send out e-mails there may be some alerts that would be limited to e-mail, depending on the uptake of the service.

3.8   The e-mail service is already available through www.brent.gov.uk/ealert and details of the text message service will be provided on our general election pages at www.brent.gov.uk/generalelection at launch.

4.0   Financial Implications

4.1   There will be a financial cost to these proposals and officers are currently drawing up costing estimates. In part, the costs depend on the popularity of the service as the more text messages that are sent out, the more the service will cost to run.

4.2   The following provides some general cost guidelines:

- **Line Rental –** the phone number used to register users and to send out the messages has to be hired at a monthly cost. Currently this is estimated to be approximately £60 per month.
- **Charge to send a message –** there are two levels of charge for sending out text messages. The Council receives 3,000 free texts a month and then extras are paid for at roughly 5p per text. We would be able to make use of a percentage of the free texts depending on usage by other departments. The total cost will therefore depend on the number of subscribers and the number of messages we send out. For example if we have 100 subscribers and we send out 2 messages after the free texts have been used up then the total cost will be (5p x 100) x 2 = 1000p.

4.3   The following table gives an idea of the approximate costs relative to the number of messages sent out and the number of subscribers. It also assumes we will rent the phone line for 4 months (for the purposes of this table we will assume that we can make use of 500 free texts per month for two months – 1000 in total) :

No. of Subscribers	Messages Sent			
	5	7	10	12
100	£240	£240	£240	£250
500	£315	£340	£440	£490
1000	£440	£540	$690	£790
2500	£815	£1065	£1440	£1690
5000	£1440	£1940	£2690	£3190

4.4   It should be noted that if the project attracted more subscribers than expected, a way of controlling the costs is to simply send out less messages.

4.5   The e-mail alert system is not mentioned in the costs above as it is already a Council system and so there would no extra costs to set up the system. It does not cost anything to send out e-mails.

4.6   Note that it does not cost mobile phone users anything to send the registration text message beyond their normal network charges.

5.0 Legal Implications

5.1 Data protection:
Both the e-mail alert and the text message systems are council wide systems. Any information collected is stored in compliance with the rules for these services. All information would therefore be stored in compliance with Data Protection legislation.

6.0 Diversity Implications

6.1 It is hoped that this project will have positive diversity implications as the aim is to connect with regular mobile phone and internet users who are often in the younger age ranges that traditional election information struggles to reach.

7.0 Background Papers

None.

Contact Officer:
Matthew Mannion
Democratic Services
Room 106
Town Hall
Forty Lane
Wembley

Tel: 020 8937 1355
Fax: 020 8937 1360
Email: matthew.mannion@brent.gov.uk

Peter Goss
Democratic Services Manager