

## Tender Called For Polls Hotline Service

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THE Elections Department (ELD) plans to set up a hotline to be used during the next general and presidential elections, to deal with the expected surge in public inquiries.

The ELD called for a tender for the hotline service, which it may spend up to \$1 million on, earlier this month.

The call for the hotline comes as updated voter rolls were opened to the public for inspection on Monday, when changes to the boundaries of polling districts were also announced, fuelling talk that the next General Election may be called sooner.

But the ELD told The Straits Times that the preparation of the hotline service is just one aspect of the routine work put into organising elections. "The calling of tender or invitation to quote for goods and services is part of the work," an ELD spokesman said.

The call for tender closes on March 16. No date to award the tender is specified, but quotations from those interested are valid for three months after the tender closes, the ELD said. Whoever wins the contract then has three months to deliver the system.

Taking all the dates into account, some political observers say the General Election is likely to be called only after September.

Among them is National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser, who said: "It does look like the election would have to be after September.

"However, much depends on how complicated and long-drawn the internal process for awarding the tender is, and how soon the hotline can be up and running."

However, Associate Professor Tan noted that the election could still be called in May this year, assuming that the tender-awarding process and the setting up of the hotline take a month each.

But others noted that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong could still call an election before the hotline is ready.

They included Associate Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University, who said: "It would be very odd for the PM to be limited by an administrative procedure.

"I'm sure the ELD has a contingency plan should the hotline not be set up before the election is called."

He added that it was not unusual to call for the tender at this time, as the next General Election must be called within the next two years.

Tender documents posted on government procurement site GeBiz show that the department wants an interactive voice response service that can answer basic questions, such as those on a person's eligibility to vote.

It must be available in all four official languages and the system must be able to handle up to 240 callers at the same time.

The money will pay for the software, computers and headsets for call agents needed to run the service, among other things.

The last reported hotline tender for a General Election was called in January 2010, more than a year before the May 2011 polls. The next General Election must be held by January 2017 and the next presidential election, by August 2017.