

# QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



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7 December 2009

## 1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise and update members as to the service overview and priorities, current issues and the future direction of the Joint Board.

## 2.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION SERVICE OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

### 2.1 Electoral Registration – Service Overview 25<sup>th</sup> August 2009 – 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009

#### 2.1.1 2009 Annual Canvass

The annual canvass is now complete and the register published on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2009. Unfortunately the form return rate has dropped this year from 77.3% in 2008 to 74.6% this year, a 2.7% fall. After deadwooding, the return as defined by Electoral Commission performance standards has dropped by a marginally lower percentage of 2.2%, from 87% in 2008 to 84.8%.

The three month annual canvass period is the peak workload time for the electoral staff. Leave is restricted at this period of time and I am pleased to say the entire canvass has been concluded on time with full checks and audits being carried out. I would like to express my thanks to the staff who have worked diligently ensuring the timeous publication of the register.

To maximise registration extensive contact was made with households in Lothian and several advertising initiatives were put in place. We consider that the initiatives introduced over the last two years have now helped to reverse or at least halt the decreasing return rates that have existed for 8 years.

##### 2.1.1.1 Canvass Household Contact

Every effort is made to contact the electorate within Lothian during the canvass with each household being given at least three opportunities to provide the required information to ensure all electors are appropriately registered.

- The Royal Mail commenced the delivery of 356,518 registration forms on 19<sup>th</sup> August to all households in Lothian. The percentage return rate from the first issue was 59.4%.
- A door to door canvass was carried out on 28,994 households with a percentage return rate at the door of 54.6%. The door to door canvass was carried out across a range of areas throughout Lothian. We shall be able to analyse the financial and staff costs involved together with any increase/decrease in return rates.
- 156,190 reminder registration forms were passed to Royal Mail on 5<sup>th</sup> October for delivery to all households in Lothian where a canvass form had not been returned. The percentage return rate from the second issue was only 22.7% i.e. approximately 120,780 households have failed to return a form after the second request to do so.
- 120,780 final reminder registration forms were passed to Royal Mail on 3<sup>rd</sup> November for delivery to all households in Lothian where a canvass form had not been returned from the two previous issues. As the return rate had dropped from the previous year I included an insert with this form in an attempt to improve this return. Unfortunately the percentage return rate from the third issue was only 18.55% which is slightly less than the 19% at this stage in 2008.

#### **2.1.1.2 Advertising During The Canvass**

The following initiatives, which are varied, try to reach the diverse population we serve.

- A radio advert was placed on local Radio Ramadan which transmitted daily from the 21<sup>st</sup> August to 19<sup>th</sup> September and an advert placed on their website to encourage registration within this ethnic group.
- Adverts were placed on Lothian buses and First buses in East and West Lothian during the month of September again bringing the need for registration to the attention of the electorate.
- Electoral Registration staff attended Edinburgh Council citizenship ceremonies to encourage registration of new citizens.
- A poster size advert was placed on the platform of Haymarket rail station from March 2009 aimed at rail commuters.
- Posters were supplied to constituent councils for display at council offices, community centres and libraries
- An advert has been placed for a year in the Omni and Vue cinemas aimed at young persons within the electorate.

- Staff contacted care homes offering advice and assistance in the completion of the canvass forms.
- We have ER information pages on social networking sites Bebo and Myspace aimed at 18 – 25 year olds.
- Excellent partnership working has been entered into with West Lothian Council's Democracy Challenge Initiative aimed at educating S6 pupils on registration and voting. We aim to pilot similar initiatives in the 3 other constituent council areas.

### **2.1.2 Rolling Registration**

Rolling Registration is suspended during the canvass period because there is no update to the register undertaken from the 1<sup>st</sup> September until the new register comes into force on 1<sup>st</sup> December each year.

### **2.1.3 Absent Voters List**

The number of electors on the absent vote list at the present day is 83,132.

### **2.1.4 Electoral Commission**

#### **2.1.4.1 Financial Return for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain**

The Electoral Commission ingathered Financial Returns for Electoral Registration Officers in July 2009. While no individual feedback has been received a national report highlighting all Scotland information is being prepared by the Electoral Commission.

#### **2.1.4.2 Performance Standards for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain**

Performance standards are due to be submitted by 11<sup>th</sup> December 2009. The figures required are currently being collated and the return will be submitted by the due date.

## **2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities December 2009 – February 2010**

### **2.2.1 The service priorities over the next 3 months**

- Apply absent voting requests as received
- Continue with initiatives to encourage participation and improve registration rates
- Continue with data matching and cleansing in preparation for the first stage of CORE.

- Complete the Lothian return for the Electoral Commission Performance Standards for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain

### **3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES**

#### **3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview– 24<sup>th</sup> August 2009 – 25<sup>h</sup> November 2009**

##### **3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings**

As at 24<sup>th</sup> August 2009 there were 386,048 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen to 386,757 as at 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009, an increase of 709 dwellings in 3 months. In Band 'D' equivalent terms the Council Tax List has increased from 393,278 to 393,836, an increase of 558. This surprisingly is approximately 1% more than the equivalent period in 2008.

##### **3.1.2 Council Tax – Altered Bands**

During the period, as a result of alterations carried out prior to the date of sale and re-appraisal of bandings, the bandings of 30 dwellings have been altered.

##### **3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales**

During the period, the records of 1,446 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings. The updated information should improve the time taken to alter the bands of any altered dwellings which are subsequently sold and also ensure preparation for any future revaluation or property tax.

##### **3.1.4 Council Tax – Proposals and Appeals**

The numbers of Council Tax proposals/appeals outstanding continues to stand at reasonable levels. As at 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009 there were 113 cases outstanding. A diet of appeal hearings has been arranged to ensure the disposal of most of the outstanding cases.

#### **3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities December 2009 – February 2010**

The main service priorities in Council Tax are as normal:-

- To continue improvement on the time taken between completion of new dwellings and the insertion of the dwelling in the Council Tax List in accordance with performance targets;
- To continue improvement on the time taken between the sale of houses which have been altered and the date their Council Tax Band is changed;

- To update my records by carrying out the survey of Council Tax subjects which have been altered and not sold;
- To continue to resolve proposals and appeals against Council Tax banding.

#### **4.0 NON DOMESTIC RATING OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES**

#### **4.1 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Overview 24<sup>th</sup> August 2009 – 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

##### **4.1.1 2005 Revaluation Appeals**

All appeals, with the exception of those referred to the Lands Tribunal for Scotland, were disposed of by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2008 in line with the Valuation Timetable Order. There are currently 31 Telecommunication Networks, 6 Bingo Halls, 2 Canal Undertakings and 3 Racetrack and stables subjects on the outstanding appeal list.

##### **4.1.2 Running Roll**

My professional and technical staff have continued to survey and value subjects that have been newly constructed, altered or demolished. From 24<sup>th</sup> August to 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009, there have been 300 additions, 762 alterations and 272 deletions. The number of new subjects entering the Valuation Roll during this period is marginally more than the 284 new entries added during the comparable 3 month period in 2008. The number of alterations, up from 736, also show a slight increase, as do deletions which are up from 263.

##### **4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals**

As a result of amendments to the Valuation Roll and, in the majority of cases, the tram works, running roll appeals are constantly being received and dealt with. As at 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009, there were 873 appeals outstanding. During the period 24<sup>th</sup> August 2009 to 25<sup>th</sup> November, 487 appeals have been resolved and a further 142 appeals received.

The disposal of appeals is proving to be a major burden on the staff with many more appeals proceeding to formal hearing than in previous years. The cost in terms of staff time, legal costs and staff moral is concerning.

In the period from 23<sup>rd</sup> October to 11<sup>th</sup> December staff attended 13 Valuation Appeal Committee Hearings with one such hearing having around 20 surveyors appear to give evidence and the hearing progressed to a second day.

##### **4.1.4 Lands Tribunal and Lands Valuation Appeal Courts**

Since my last report, at the request of the ratepayer, a case was heard at the Lands Tribunal for Scotland to determine the rateability of vending machine stances in

Waverley Railway Station. The Tribunal determined that the subjects were not in separate occupation and should therefore be removed from the Roll.

I appealed a decision of the Lothian Valuation Appeal Committee where an allowance was granted to an office because of tramwork disturbance. This appeal was heard by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court and the decision is awaited

#### **4.1.5 2010 Revaluation**

My professional and technical staff worked exceptionally well to achieve the revaluation of all subjects in Lothian. Each Revaluation the time allocated by the Government officials for this task is shortened thus requiring excellent planning and increased reliance on quality IT systems. This Revaluation we were required to provide estimates by April and to complete the revaluation of all properties by 31<sup>st</sup> August 2009. I am very pleased to say that with professionalism and commitment of my valuation teams the task was completed on time.

The task is not however fully complete until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 when any alterations being carried out in this intervening period will be required to be valued for the current Roll and revalued for the Revaluation Roll.

With a view to increasing openness and transparency summary valuations of bulk subjects including shops, offices and industrials will for the first time be available to the ratepayers in Scotland via the internet. It is hoped that this initiative will enable ratepayers to check their Net Annual Values and increase the confidence of the ratepayer in the accuracy of the assessment.

Because of the immensity of the tasks surrounding Revaluation I have prepared a separate report for members.

#### **4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities November 2009 – February 2010**

The service priorities in Non-Domestic Rating are:-

- To prepare cases as may be required by the Valuation Appeal Committee, Lands Tribunal for Scotland and the Lands Valuation Appeal Court;
- To schedule and action the disposal of appeals resulting from Running Roll alterations;
- To survey, value and re-value new property or alterations to existing properties.
- To review, re-analyse and revalue where necessary for the 2010 Revaluation.

## **5.0 HUMAN RESOURCES**

### **5.1 UNISON**

Regular JCC meetings continue to be held and no items of significant note raised. A request has however been made that they attend a JCG to put forward their position regarding proposed budget cuts.

### **5.2 Staffing**

There have been a few changes to staffing since my last report.

I terminated the contract of one temporary valuer and employed one valuer on a two year temporary contract.

I received resignations from one technician and one admin assistant which will remain unfilled.

To ensure the canvass workload is efficiently dealt with I employed 6 temporary staff on a week to week basis to cover the peak workload period. 43 canvassers were employed to carry out door to door canvass duties. One member of the team remains in post until mid December

I am sad to say that I lost an excellent member of staff who died after a short battle against a terminal illness. She will be greatly missed both for her work ethic and her cheerful disposition, she made a valued contribution to the organisation and could be relied upon at all times

In light of proposed budget cuts I have taken the decision to not fill any vacant posts which arise. I have also refused any increase in hours requested by existing staff.

### **5.3 Equalities**

No items of concern have been received. We continue to seek avenues to ensure that we reach minority groups and have recently made contact with the Deaf Society for Scotland which has proved very helpful in our understanding of limitations and expectations.

### **5.4 Flexible Work Options Policy**

The annual review and consideration of all flexible work options is now complete. Ten requests for altered work patterns were considered in early November to take effect from January 2009. Five applications were approved and five refused.

## 6.0 RISK MANAGEMENT

The risk register continues to be updated at each management meeting ensuring that all risks are considered and mitigated as soon as practicable.

The large number of outstanding valuation appeals has been noted as a potential risk necessitating increased workload and legal costs for the defence of appeals during 2009/10.

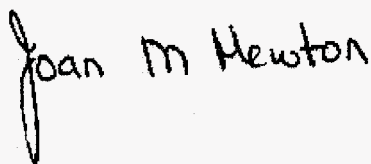
Non-filling of posts which become vacant was added to the Risk Register as a risk which could affect key performance indicators and possibly the delivery of our statutory duties.

## 7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Although here are no financial implications arising from this report I would ask you to note that to offset the impending increase in legal costs arising from the large non-domestic appeal workload it will be necessary to reduce spending in other parts of the organisation.

## 8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Board is requested to note the contents of this report.



Joan M Hewton  
ASSESSOR & ERO

7 December 2009