

QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



29 November 2010

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 24 August 2010 – 16 November 2010

2.1.1 Rolling Registration

Rolling registration is suspended during the canvass unless the area has an election during the canvass period. The only rolling registration changes made were in Ward 16, Liberton/Gilmerton in preparation for the by-election on 9 September.

2.1.2 Absent Voters List

The number of electors on the absent vote list reported at the last meeting of the Board was 89,616 which included 448 proxies and 98-postal proxies. The number of electors on the absent voters list has increased substantially and now stands at 95,008 which include 440 proxies and 96 postal proxies.

2.1.3 2010 Canvass

The Royal Mail commenced delivery of canvass forms to the area covered by Ward 16 Liberton/Gilmerton on 12 August. 15,171 forms were provided to Royal Mail for delivery. To ensure all registrations were appropriately applied in time for the by-election which was held on 9th September 2010, a different colour of envelope was used to ensure easy identification on return and thus speedy processing. I am pleased to report that all applications were processed on time.

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The Royal Mail then commenced delivery of the remaining 349,433 canvass forms from 26th August and 41,628 forms retained for door to door canvassing. 77 canvassers were employed to carry out door to door canvassing between 20 August and 12 September.

The annual canvass is now essentially complete and the register published is expected to be published on 29 November 2010. The form return rate currently showing 74% would appear to be in line with last year's final return of 74.6%. After deadwooding, the return as defined by Electoral Commission performance standards is again expected to be in line with last years return of 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.

In addition to the canvass duties the senior electoral staff also had to implement changes required as a result of the Scottish Parliamentary Boundary review. This additional task, because of timing of agreements to the final boundaries and thereafter the need to reallocate polling places requires to be actioned during the final stages of the canvass, increases the workload at this very busy period. 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 few years have now helped to halt the decreasing return rates that have existed for 8 years.

2.1.3.1 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 364,604 registration forms from 12 August to all households in Lothian. The percentage return rate from the first issue was 57.4%.
- A door to door canvass was carried out on 41,628 households with a percentage return rate at the door of 54%. The door to door canvass was carried out across a range of areas throughout Lothian.
- 165,044 reminder registration forms were passed to Royal Mail for delivery on 30 September to all households in Lothian where a canvass form had not been returned. The percentage return rate from the second issue was only 25.14% i.e. approximately 123,542 households have failed to return a form after the second request to do so.
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- 123,542 final reminder registration forms were passed to Royal Mail for delivery on 28 October 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 18.25% as it stands at present.

2.1.3.2 Advertising During The Canvass

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

- A guest information slot on East Lothian's web based radio station East Coast FM;
- English and Urdu audio adverts and web adverts placed on Radio Ramadan and Radio Ramadan website;
- Adverts placed in Lothian buses in Edinburgh and First buses in East, Mid and West Lothian;
- Adverts placed on selected bus shelters in all Lothian Council areas;
- Electoral Registration staff attended Edinburgh Council citizenship ceremonies;
- A poster size advert situated on the platform of Haymarket rail station;
- Posters supplied to constituent councils for display at council offices, community centres and libraries and an MP's office (Ian Murray – Edinburgh South);
- Adverts placed in the Omni and Vue cinemas in Edinburgh and Livingston;
- Adverts placed in Pre Vue Cinema magazine;
- Adverts placed in Council newspapers and magazines;
- Staff contacted care homes offering advice and assistance in the completion of the canvass forms;
- ER information pages on social networking sites Bebo and Myspace;
- Bluetooth notification tried around Edinburgh University complex;
- Excellent partnership working continued with West Lothian Council's Democracy Challenge Initiative aimed at educating S6 pupils on registration and voting.

2.1.4 Electoral Registration System

The electronic electoral management system currently in use by Lothian Valuation Joint Board had been causing some concern primarily due to an out of date operating platform which was considered not fit for purpose. The current supplier had gone through numerous buy-outs in recent years. This caused various problems with contact persons changing repeatedly thus affecting the quality and speed of required changes being implemented. Latterly only Tayside and Lothian had remained with this company and both organisations were dissatisfied with the level of service and increased risk.

After going out to tender we have concluded that our chosen supplier will provide a more robust modern system and an efficient customer service and support. As there are limited off-the-shelf electoral systems on the market it was essential to consider not only initial/...

2.1.4/ initial costs but also the annual costs and the cost of development required at each legislative change of which there are many envisaged in the near future. It is anticipated that annual costs, including planned development work and licence fees will be more cost efficient for the Board.

2.1.5 Cabinet Office Electoral Registration Transformation Programme

The Cabinet Office has been seeking volunteers to work with them on data matching schemes in preparation for the introduction of individual registration in 2014. Lothian Valuation Joint Board submitted a report intimating our interest in taking part in the pilot scheme. The scheme is to be fully funded and in my view would provide me with good material which could improve the completeness and accuracy of the Lothian Electoral Register. It is anticipated that successful applicants will be notified in the next few weeks.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities December 2010 – February 2011

2.2.1 The service priorities over the next 3 months

- Carry out preparatory work for the forthcoming Scottish Parliamentary Election and UK AV Referendum;
- Apply absent and proxy voting requests as received;
- Continue with initiatives to encourage participation and improve registration;
- Complete Electoral Commission performance standards return;
- Compile and return statutory electorate statistics to GROS.

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview–24 August 2010 – 15 November

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 24 August 2010 there were 388,684 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen to 389,583 as at 15 November 2010, an increase of 899 dwellings in 3 months. In Band 'D' equivalent terms the Council Tax List has increased from 396,482 to 397,429, an increase of 947. This is a healthy increase considering the economic climate.

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 68 dwellings have been altered. The number of band changes remains at a very low level compared to previous years.

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3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 591 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings. As previously reported 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 15 November 2010 there were 91 cases outstanding. Appeal hearings continue to be arranged regularly to ensure the disposal of most of outstanding cases with six anticipated hearing dates scheduled for 2011.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities November 2010 – February 2011

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

- 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;
- Continue improvement on the time taken between the sale of houses which have been altered and the date their Council Tax Band is changed;
- Update my records by carrying out the survey of Council Tax subjects which have been altered and not sold;
- 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 August 2010 – 15 November 2010

4.1.1 2005 Revaluation Appeals

There still remains the same number of 2005 Revaluation appeals, held by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland. Progress with the outstanding appeals is in the hands of the Lands Tribunal and outwith my control at present.

4.1.2 2010 Revaluation Appeals

The total number of appeals received against the new 2010 Revaluation Rateable Values as at 15 November stood at 10,960. Of these, 92 appeals have now been resolved. The vast majority of Revaluation appeals were lodged during the month of September, the last month permitted by statute, this huge surge of appeals in the last few weeks created a/...

4.1.2/ a large amount of work for staff who were required to scan the documentation and add the details to the appeals database thus enabling all processes and procedures to be monitored throughout the appeal disposal programme.

The number of appeals has increased from 8,578 lodged in 2005 to 10,960 in 2010, an increase of 28%.

The last date for reaching agreement on the 2010 Revaluation appeals is 31 December 2013 and a diet of hearings has been scheduled to take place from early 2011. The increased workload necessitated by the volume of appeals may prove difficult with current valuation staff resources.

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 August 2010 to 15 November, there have been 247 additions, 303 valuation alterations and 170 deletions. The property market continues to be very sluggish with limited construction commencing.

4.1.3 2005 Running Roll Appeals

As a result of amendments to the 2005 Valuation Roll running roll appeals continue to be received and dealt with. As at 15 November 2010, there were 1123 appeals outstanding. During the period 24 August 2010 to 15 November 2010, 396 appeals have been resolved and a further 834 appeals received. All running roll appeals are cited for hearing through to the end of January 2011 to allow commencement of the Revaluation appeals in early 2011. The last date for lodging appeals against the old Roll was 30 September 2010.

4.1.4 2010 Running Roll Appeals

As a result of the declining property market and amendments to the 2010 Valuation Roll, running roll appeals are regularly received. Appeals suggesting a fall in value effective in this financial year must be lodged by 31 March 2011. As at 15 November 2010, there are at present 482 appeals to be listed for hearing. All 2010 running roll appeals lodged during this financial year follow the same disposal procedure as the revaluation appeals.

I have been advised by numerous private practice surveyors that there is a strong possibility that many thousands of appeals may be lodged at the end of this financial year. If the number of running roll appeals lodged rises significantly above the norm lodged in previous years I may need to reconsider appropriate staffing levels required to resolve the appeal workload. I will monitor the situation closely.

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4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities November 2010 – February 2011

The service priorities in Non-Domestic Rating are:-

- Prepare cases as may be required by the Valuation Appeal Committee;
- Schedule and action the disposal of appeals resulting from the Revaluation and Running Roll alterations;
- Survey and value new property or alterations to existing properties to ensure the Valuation Roll is as complete and accurate as possible;
- Continue to update databases with rent, cost, turnover and throughput information to ensure analysis is as complete and accurate as possible.
- Monitor the increasing number of appeals and impact on staffing resources.

5.0 HUMAN RESOURCES

5.1 UNISON

Regular JCC meetings continue to be held and no items of note have been raised. We continue to discuss my proposed reviewed schemes for the career development of Valuers and Technicians.

We continue to review, adapt and promote the LVJB Performance Review and Development Scheme and a further draft scheme is provided to you today for noting as part of a separate report.

I have entered discussions regarding non-filling of vacancies and reduction of expenditure. I have further discussed 2 policies which are akin to the City of Edinburgh Council policies currently existing for voluntary early release and redundancy. The 2 policies are still under consideration by UNISON and should be presented at the next Board meeting.

5.2 Staffing

As a cost saving measure the post of Divisional Assessor was advertised internally and has been offered and accepted by Gary Elliot who takes up the role on 1 December 2010. I welcome him to the post and hope he enjoys the challenges in his new role.

The post of Divisional Valuer vacated by Mr Elliot has also been advertised internally and the vacated Valuer post will not be filled.

5.3 Equalities

No items of concern have been received.

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 strategic risk register continues to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Further job specific risk registers are currently under development to meet audit recommendations.

7.0 2011-14 FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

I have commenced discussions with the Treasurer to the Board and also UNISON regarding financial constraints for the forthcoming years. As you are aware I have closely managed the budget over the last few years ensuring Best Value for the Board.

Over the last few years I have had a policy of reviewing each post on the resignation of any employee and I now consider I have a relatively streamlined organisation. I consider there is limited scope to further reduce staffing to any great degree without impinging on performance and service delivery.

I am currently considering all possible avenues to reduce expenditure and will continue discussions with the Treasurer and UNISON and hope to have an acceptable budget proposal for the meeting of the Board in February 2011.

As you are aware the Board does not have access to a capital budget or financial reserves. Should it become necessary to release staff it is possible that insufficient funding shall be available to make awards under the terms of the policies indicated in this report and, in addition, to repay pension strain costs that may arise.

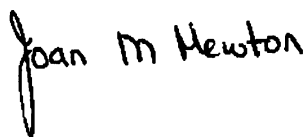
In order to make provision for this eventuality it is requested that the Board give consideration that any savings generated from this years budget allocation be held in reserve for the sole purposes of discharging liabilities arising from future staff release.

8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Board is requested to note the contents of this report and approve the use of savings from the 2010/11 allocation for any redundancy payments required.



Joan M Hewton
ASSESSOR & ERO

29 November 2010