

QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



28 November 2011

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 20th August 2011 – 15th November 2011

2.1.1 Rolling Registration

The 1st September update to the published register encompassed applications received during the period 12th July and 10th August 2011, and during this period my staff actioned 2,496 additions; 2,387 removals and 42 changes.

2.1.2 Absent Voters List

At the time of the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary Election & UK Referendum the absent voters list stood at 100,560. I reported at the last meeting that the number of electors on the absent vote standing list had fallen slightly to 96,655. As a result of the Canvass activity this number will almost certainly have increased to more than 100,000.

2.1.3 2011 Canvass

The Royal Mail commenced delivery of Canvass forms from 25th August. 351,915 forms were provided to Royal Mail for delivery and 39,536 forms retained for door to door canvassing. 73 canvassers were employed to carry out door to door canvassing between 26th August and 19th September.

The annual canvass is now essentially complete and the register published is expected to be published on 29th November 2011. The form return rate currently showing 75% 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.

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 recent trend of decreasing return rates.

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 eligible electors are appropriately registered.

- The Royal Mail commenced the delivery of 351,195 registration forms from 25th 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 39,536 households with a percentage return rate at the door of 56.8%. The door to door canvass was carried out across a range of areas throughout Lothian.
- 161,618 reminder registration forms were passed to Royal Mail for delivery on 30th September to all households in Lothian where a canvass form had not been returned. The percentage return rate from the second issue was only 25.6% i.e. approximately 41,441 households have failed to return a form after the second request to do so.
- 120,171 final reminder registration forms were passed to Royal Mail for delivery on 28th October to all households in Lothian where a canvass form had not been returned from the two previous issues. Unfortunately the percentage return rate from the third issue was only 16.9% as it stands at present.

2.1.3.2 Advertising During The Canvass

Publicity was reviewed and reduced to only participate in advertising which was considered beneficial, the resultant actions in place for this canvass included;-

- Poster in place at Haymarket railway station;
- Advertising panels placed inside First buses throughout Lothian;
- Participation in West Lothian schools democracy challenge initiative;
- Press release to Local Area newspapers;
- Advert in the Edinburgh and area Service (HM Forces) community official guide

2.1.3.3 Internet/Email/Text Confirmation of Details

I introduced a new method for the Lothian electorate to confirm that their details have remained unchanged during the canvass period. The electorate were given the option of confirming their details by either telephone, SMS text message or via the internet as opposed to returning by post via Royal Mail. The system costs, including the cost of producing and enclosing with every canvass form, an A4 note explaining the new options, required that 47,000 responses would need to be received through these methods to allow us to break even. I am delighted to say that approximately 78,000 returns were made through the new system which gave the following benefits:-

- Reduced costs in return mail charges.
- Reduced paper handling, scanning and processing by staff

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities November 2011 – February 2012

2.2.1 The service priorities over the next 3 months

- Conclude postal and door to door canvass of all Lothian households;
- Continue with initiatives to encourage participation and improve registration rates;
- Complete Electoral Commission financial and performance standards return;
- Complete statutory statistical return;
- Apply absent voting requests as received;
- Apply rolling registration applications as received
- Work with the Cabinet Office in the Data Matching Pilot exercise;
- Preparation work for 3 May 2012 Local Council elections

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 22nd August 2011 – 15th November 2011

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 22nd August 2011 there were 391,298 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen very slightly to 392,035 as at 15th November 2011, an increase of just 737 dwellings in 3 months.

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 48 dwellings have been altered. The number of band changes remains at a very low level.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 462 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 15th September 2011 there were 52 cases outstanding. Appeal hearings continue to be arranged regularly to ensure the disposal of most of outstanding cases with hearings arranged for 2nd February, 24th February and 30th March

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities November 2011 – February 2012

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 22nd August 2011 – 15th November 2011

4.1.1 2005 Revaluation Appeals

There has been no change in the number of appeals which remain outstanding at the Lands Tribunal. The listing of such appeals is in the hands of the Tribunal.

4.1.2 2010 Revaluation Appeals

A total of 10,927 appeals were received against the 2010 Revaluation Roll as published. The number of subjects appealed was 10,386. A diary of courts is arranged to ensure the appeals are all disposed of by the 31st December 2013, the last date permitted by statute. A total of 6,713 appeals have been resolved to date with 3,112 of those appeals being dealt with during the period 22nd August to 15th November. I am pleased to report that Lothian is proceeding exceptionally well through the revaluation appeals and is currently showing the highest percentage of disposal.

As previously reported I had hoped to clear 8,700 Revaluation appeals by 31st March 2012. Although my staff are working very diligently and are progressing matters as far as possible it may not be possible to reach this ambitious target. As a result of some uncertainty with the legislation it may not be possible to proceed as hoped until the matter is clarified by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court, probably in May/June 2012.

16 Revaluation appeal courts are scheduled to take place between 15th November 2011 and the end of March 2012. Progress will remain under close monitoring to ensure appeals are concluded within the statutory time period.

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 22nd August 2011 to 15th November, there have been 195 additions, 809 valuation alterations and 180 deletions.

4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals

As a result of amendments to the Valuation Roll and, issues relating mainly to the economic decline, running roll appeals are constantly being received and dealt with. As at 22nd August, there were 6,826 appeals outstanding. As at 15th November this number had risen to 7,206. Courts to deal with this type of appeal are scheduled to commence with a limited number of subjects on 23rd February 2012. As previously mentioned the appeals are required to be cleared, within the same statutory framework as the Revaluation appeals, by 31st December 2013.

4.1.4 Lands Tribunal and Lands Valuation Appeal Courts

I am working, with my Head of Valuation Service in the preparation of pharmacy shop appeals progressing to hearing by the Lands Tribunal of Scotland. The Lands Tribunal has now set a date of 17th January 2012 for hearing the appeals.

I also have an appeal against a Valuation Appeal Committee decision not to refer some public house appeals which are cited for hearing by the Lands Tribunal of Scotland on 9th January 2012.

I have no cases currently listed for hearing by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court.

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities November 2011 – February 2012

The service priorities in Non-Domestic Rating are:-

- Prepare cases required by the Valuation Appeal Committee and Lands Tribunal for Scotland;
- Schedule and action the disposal of appeals resulting from the 2010 Revaluation;
- Commence scheduling and action the disposal of the 2010/11 Running Roll appeals;
- 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.

5.0 HUMAN RESOURCES

5.1 UNISON

Regular JCC meetings continue to be held.

The following two documents have been reviewed and have been passed to Unison for discussion and comment:-

- Scheme of Flexible Working Hours
- Staff Guidance Notes on Attendance

As a result of the reduced staffing numbers due to non-filling of vacancies some changes in working practices were introduced within the support and administration areas on a trial basis earlier in the year. Final discussions relating to the changes are being held with the trade union.

Discussions took place regarding the Queens Diamond Jubilee with the recommendation that the day should be added as a floating day. This proposal would allow the office to remain open to the public.

5.2 Staffing

I am pleased to say that I have a new Divisional Assessor who took up post on 14th November 2011.

Senior managers are currently considering various Flexible Work Options for 9 staff as part of the annual process in accordance with the policy.

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.

An exercise is under way to allow the evaluation of the technical capabilities of home-working. If the technical capabilities meet the job requirements this could enable staff to work from home in the event of emergencies.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

I would ask the Board to approve that the Queens Diamond Jubilee be added as a floating day to staff leave entitlement.

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

Joan M Hewton
ASSESSOR & ERO

28 November 2011