

ASSESSOR'S QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



2 September 2013

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 1st April 2013 – 19th August 2013

2.1.1 Absent Voters List

As at 1 August 2013 the number of postal voters on the list was 108,679.

In compliance with the Representation of the People, The Elections (Refresh of Signatures for Absent Voters) Regulations 2013 we issued 58,997 requests for fresh signatures on 1st August 2013. The return rate was in excess of 70% and on 23rd August 2013 approximately 16,000 reminders were issued to non-responders. Any absent voters who fail to return a fresh signature by 12th September will be sent notification that their absent vote has been cancelled and their names will be removed from the absent voters list. All cancellation letters will have an absent vote application form enclosed.

2.1.2 Rolling Registration

Since the beginning of the financial year, during the rolling registration update periods for April through to August, my staff processed a total of 9,844 additions to the register, 8,623 removals and 341 amendments. There has therefore been a very slight increase in the number of electors.

2.1.3 Cabinet Office Data Matching Pilot

I have given several reports to the previous Board members on the Cabinet Office data matching pilots which we have participated in. An additional request has been made to data match with DVLA records. I have agreed to participate in this final pilot and hope that it will provide me with a further means of matching records and confirming electors in preparation for the introduction of individual electoral registration in September/October 2014.

2.1.4 Transition to Individual Electoral Registration

As I have previously mentioned the transition to individual registration commences this year. During August, in line with the rest of the UK, we were expected to carry out a confirmation dry run to allow the Cabinet Office and me to estimate the likely match rate that we may expect when IER is formally introduced in autumn 2014. The dry run is also to ensure that all systems, data and processes are fit for purpose.

Unfortunately we have not been able to participate in this dry run as initially timetabled. Electoral Registration Offices which are not GSX compliant are required to set up additional security measures and introduce altered working practices. The four EROs in Scotland are working towards this additional compliance with a view to carrying out the dry run at a slightly later date. The new security measures put in place, as a requirement of IER data matching, are chargeable to the Cabinet Office.

2.1.5 2013 Canvass

Planning for the 2013 canvass has been underway for some time and members should note that it is to be carried out from 1st October with a publication date of 10th March 2014. This timing varies dramatically from the traditional August to 1st December publication, I intend to carry out all activities in line with the 2012 implementation plan. Because of the great importance of this canvass and also the additional time available I intend to carry out an additional postal reminder in January/February 2014 in addition to the similar canvass duties employed for 2012.

The Royal Mail are expected to commence delivery of Canvass forms from 9th October this year.

2.1.6 Electoral Commission Canvass Performance Assessment

The Electoral Commission required me to submit my self-assessment of my intended 2013 canvass performance by 23rd August. I am pleased to report that I have self assessed as meeting or exceeding all required standards.

2.1.7 Scottish Independence Referendum

Legislation has now been enacted to extend the voting age franchise to 16 and 17 year olds for the Referendum. The legislation is therefore now in place to allow young voter registration forms to be issued with this year's autumn canvass due to commence in October. Each household will receive both a household form and a young person's voter registration form. The household canvass form should be completed to include all persons aged 16 and over at the date of completing the canvass form. Young persons who will attain the age of 16 by the referendum date should complete the separate Young Person's Voter Registration Form.

Unfortunately/...

2.1.7/ Unfortunately as the legislation was not enacted prior to the school summer break the education establishments in Lothian have not supplied with the names of young persons in Lothian who left school at the end of last term. Most young persons who are currently in local authority schooling will receive a pre-populated canvass for this October. I am having some difficulty getting information from independent schools but I continue to make every effort to get the names of as many eligible young persons as possible.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities September 2013 – December 2013

2.2.1 The service priorities over the next 3 months

- Issue cancellation letters to all absent voters who have failed to provide fresh signatures;
- Update the electoral register to include new electors, amend registration data and delete as required;
- Apply absent voting requests as received;
- Continue with introduction of security measures required by the Cabinet Office;
- Carry out the confirmation dry run at the time required;
- Carry out postal and personal door to door canvass of all Lothian households;
- Continue with initiatives to encourage participation and improve registration rates;
- Work with the Cabinet Office in the final Data Matching Pilot exercise.

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview–1st April 2013 – 19th August 2013

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 1st April 2013 there were 395,666 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen very slightly to 396,895 as at 19th August 2013, an increase of just 1,229 dwellings in over 4½ months. House building continues to be very sluggish.

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 66 dwellings have been altered. The number of band changes remains at a very low level possibly reflecting the lower number of house sales.

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3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 549 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 1st April 2013 there were 67 cases outstanding. As at 19th August 2013 there were 110 cases outstanding. Appeal hearings continue to be arranged regularly to ensure the disposal of cases at least equates to the number received thus maintaining low numbers outstanding.

3.1.5 Council Tax File Review

The process of modernisation of the file contents and document retention continues. Since the start of the task in July 2012 43,000 domestic files have now been scanned and documentation sent for confidential disposal. This figure represents what can be achieved in one year with resources from my technical and administration teams. There are approximately 300,000 files to be cleared.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities September 2013 – December 2013

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;
- Continue with the transfer of house data from paper to electronic format and review performance achieved.

4.0 NON DOMESTIC RATING OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

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4.0 NON DOMESTIC RATING OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

4.1 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Overview 1st April 2013 – 19th August 2013

4.1.1 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 total of 10,367 appeals have been resolved to date with 691 of those appeals being dealt with during the period 1st April 2013 – 19th August 2013. A diary of courts continues to ensure the appeals are all disposed of by the 31st December 2013, the last date permitted by statute.

The Scottish Government consulted with interested parties to consider requests made to extend the time limit for disposal of appeals. The Minister announced his decision in May not to extend the time period as there would be no benefit to the rate payers.

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 1st April 2013 to 19th August 2013, there have been 431 additions, 1,211 valuation alterations and 323 deletions. This is increased activity and hopefully a continued sign of a change in the commercial market.

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 where possible. As at the start of this financial year, there were 4,776 running roll appeals outstanding. During the period 1st April to 19th August 2013 3,966 of those appeals have been resolved. As at 19th August the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 1,253. Courts to deal with this type of appeal are scheduled to continue through the rest of the calendar year. The vast majority of appeals are required to be cleared, within the same statutory framework as the Revaluation appeals, by 31st December 2013. I am delighted with the significant number of appeals cleared and with the progress made in the scheduling of appeal disposal.

I am pleased to say that a further large tranche of appeals was not lodged in March 2013.

4.1.4 Lands Tribunal and Lands Valuation Appeal Courts

As the 30th June 2013 was the last date ratepayers could submit requests for referral to the Lands Tribunal of Scotland I anticipated a last minute rush to lodge requests. Fortunately the number of such requests were comparatively low. The Lothian Valuation Appeal panel has now considered all the requests made and referred some but refused many. I anticipate a small number of additional appeals will be referred by end September 2013, the last date for joint referral.

There has therefore been a slight increase in the number of appeals which are held by the Lands Tribunal for hearing. The number of 2015 revaluation and running roll appeals, excluding telecommunications, referred from Lothian stand at approximately 155. Lothian has no stated cases in preparation.

4.1.5 Scottish Government Consultation

The Scottish government published a consultation 'Supporting Business Promoting Growth' at the same time as they announced the delayed revaluation.

The analysis of the submissions and the Government's response is expected in the very near future.

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities September – December 2013

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 2010 Revaluation;
- Schedule and action the disposal of 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.

Policies are timetabled for review to ensure that all policies meet current legal, management and staff requirements.

I have been advised that strike action has been averted and that the employer's offer of 1% increase has been accepted.

5.2 Staffing

I advertised for 2 administration assistants in early August and received 179 applications. 20 applicants were selected for interview and the 2 successful candidates notified.

I have made contact with the temporary canvassers employed for last year's canvass to ensure that I have a sound base of canvassers prior to advertising for additional people. I estimate that 200 canvassers will be required to carry out all the canvass activity over November, December and January.

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5.3 Equalities

My Equalities Mainstreaming report has been published on my website.

6.0 RISK MANAGEMENT

6.1 Risk Registers

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 continue to be developed to meet audit recommendations.

6.2 Information Technology

My IT team have been heavily involved in hardware, software and premises security measures required by the Cabinet Office for the individual electoral registration confirmation dry run. The preparation of documentation has taken a considerable period of time but has now passed the required security assessments.

I have commenced renewal of all desktop computers and an upgrade to Microsoft 7 and Office 2013. Training courses have been delivered and staff are adapting well to the change.

7.0 BUILDING ISSUES

7.1 Request to Discharge Deeds

I have been requested by City of Edinburgh Council to sign a discharge of deeds for the ground adjacent to my property. When I took on the lease for the premises a further four similar office blocks were planned, I have been advised that the office development will not now progress. A long lease has been entered into by Smarts, a local development company, who intend to build industrial units. I have been required to seek legal advice from an independent solicitor.

7.2 Building Maintenance

As mentioned at the last Board meeting I have met with City of Edinburgh Council to discuss problems that exist within the premises with a view to finding appropriate solutions and rectifying all outstanding problems. There are several issues currently being rectified including renewing part of the roof covering, installation of insulation and upgrading of electrical cabling. When the work has been carried out I will be required to replace the defective plasterboard and repaint the affected areas. The full cost of this remedial work is not yet fully known.

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8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

As I have a very restrictive budget I request that the underspend money from 2012/13 be added to the sum of money retained for 'early release measures' but this time being available to me to pay for unplanned building work, solicitor costs involved in discharging the deeds for the adjacent ground and further costs for possible re-negotiation of the deeds for our office property and common areas.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

As there are no financial implications, nor approvals sought, the Joint Board is requested to note the contents of this report.

**Joan M Hewton
ASSESSOR & ERO**

21 August 2013