

ASSESSOR'S QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



3 November 2014

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 23rd August 2014 – 3rd November 2014

2.1.1 Absent Voters List

As at the publication of the Registers on 10th March 2014 the number of postal voters on the list was 103,859, this increased to 123,604 for the European Union Elections and now stands at 126,225. This increase in postal votes can be attributable mainly to the Scottish Independence Referendum in September. The current number of postal voters across the 4 constituent councils are approximately;-

- East Lothian 15,315
- Edinburgh 74,444
- Midlothian 12,621
- West Lothian 23,845

2.1.2 Rolling Registration

Since my last report, during the rolling registration update periods, my staff processed a total of 30,781 additions to the register, 12,331 removals and 1,271 amendments. To allow comparison to normal registration activity the number processed during the same period in 2013 was 7,577 additions, 9,072 removals and 480 amendments.

2.1.3 Scottish Independence Referendum

The Scottish Independence Referendum represented one of the most significant electoral events in recent times and as a result the workload within the organisation reached levels never before experienced.

Over the six week period prior to the referendum our call centre handled 35,500 telephone calls and answered 11,000 emails. Over the same period we opened and scanned approximately 70,000 items of mail.

The impact on the register was significant with 31,066 electors being added during the period 4th August to 2nd September, and 23,344 additional postal vote applications being processed during the period 4th August to 3rd September.

In the days leading up to the Referendum 779 emergency proxy applications were received. Due to the nature of these applications and the time required to consider the detail of the application there required a considerable last minute effort from staff to ensure the electors concerned received proper notification.

In order to deal effectively with the workload created by the Referendum staff were required to work overtime. An application has been made to the Scottish Government indicating that this overtime cost, in conjunction with high postage costs, represents an expenditure level considerably beyond that which would normally be expected during an election. It remains to be seen as to whether this is recognised by the Scottish Government.

2.1.4 Transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

Individual Electoral Registration came into force on the 19th September 2014.

In order to inform our electorate of this important change an IER “write out” was commenced on the 15th October.

To minimise confusion and disturbance the Cabinet Office introduced a matching process whereby all names and addresses of electors currently on electoral registers were matched to records held by The Department of Work and Pensions. The results of this process was used to inform the elector, via the “write out”, that either they had been automatically re-registered under IER, and need do nothing more, or whether they were required to complete an IER application form.

Around 85% of electors in Lothian have been automatically re-registered with the remainder requiring to complete a new registration form.

To support the move to IER and assist those electors who receive new application forms, the Cabinet Office have created an on-line registration system which is accessed through a government web site, www.gov.uk/register-to-vote. This is proving to be a considerable success with millions of applications having been received throughout the UK since IER went live.

Since the write out commenced in Lothian the majority of IER applications have been completed using the on line system rather than a paper application.

Our call centre has been busy since the write out with over 9,000 telephone calls and nearly 5,000 emails received. We are offering a telephone registration service and this is proving to be of assistance.

During November we shall undertake the first reminder issue of ITR application forms. At this time our Canvass Team shall commence door calls seeking to achieve a response from non-responders. The canvassers are utilising mobile technology where an on line application can be undertaken at the door with the elector. This facility remains under assessment and further information shall be provided in later reports.

The IER legislation provides that where an elector fails to respond to an IER application form that has been issued to them during this transition period they shall not be removed from the register due to be published on the 27th February 2015. They shall remain a registered elector until the next publication date in December 2015. In the interim ERO's shall continue to pursue these electors in order to achieve a completed form.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities November 2014 – February 2015

2.2.1 The main service priorities are:-

- Continue to process IER application forms whether that be paper forms or on line applications;
- Continue to canvass all electors where a returned IER application is required;
- Continue to canvass all void households;
- Undertake reminder issues of IER application forms;
- Continue to process all other applications for example, opt out requests, postal vote applications etc. as necessary;
- Provide a focused service to care homes and similar in respect of the transition to IER;
- Engage with student establishments to develop a strategy for student registration under IER;
- Undertake all necessary preparations, providing information and data as necessary to the Returning Officer, for the by election in Ward 5 Midlothian on the 27th November 2014;
- Publish and disseminate the Electoral Register on/by 27th February 2015

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 23rd August 2014 – 3rd November 2014

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 23rd August 2014 there were 400,583 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen very slightly to 401,463 as at 3rd November 2014, an increase of 880 dwellings in just over 2 months. This figure can be compared to the same period in 2013 where 961 dwellings were added.

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 63 dwellings have been altered which compares to 48 altered bands during the same period in 2013.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 544 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings compared to 620 dwellings during the same period in 2013. 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 23rd August 2014 there were 76 cases outstanding which remains the same as at 3rd November. 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.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities November 2014 – February 2015

The main service priorities are:-

- 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 23rd August 2014 – 3rd November 2014

4.1.1 2010 Revaluation Appeals

The number of 2010 Revaluation appeals outstanding at Lands Tribunal has not altered since my last report. The remaining appeals are expected to be heard in the next 15/18 months.

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 23rd August 2014 to 3rd November 2014, there have been 224 additions, 274 valuation alterations and 243 deletions. This can be compared to the previous period in 2013 where there was 293 additions, 521 valuation alterations and 213 deletions.

4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals

During the period 23rd August to 3rd November 2014, 297 appeals have been resolved. As at 3rd November the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 299. Courts to deal with this type of appeal are scheduled to continue through the rest of the financial year.

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities November 2014 – February 2015

The main service priorities are:-

- Prepare cases as may be required by the Valuation Appeal Committee;
- 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 AND OFFICE MANAGEMENT

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.

5.2 Staffing

One member of staff resigned during October and a further two have indicated their intention to retire during November/December. As a result I have employed two new staff commencing the 1st December 2014.

5.3 Equalities

Analysis and collection of staff data continues with a view to improve the data I hold to ensure the submitted equality outcomes can be met.

6.0 RISK MANAGEMENT

6.1 Risk Registers

The job specific risk registers continue to be updated at each service 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.

6.2 Information Technology

My IT team have been heavily involved with ensuring the requirements of, and transition arrangements for IER have been fully met. This shall continue for the immediate short term after which focus shall move onto the 2017 Revaluation.

7.0 BUILDING ISSUES

7.1 Building Maintenance

I am continuing to investigate issues regarding the air conditioning system with both the landlord and our Facilities Management Company. At this stage it appears the scale of the problem may not be as extensive as first indicated.

We are in regular contact and discussion with our Facilities Management Company ensuring we receive an effective and value for money service.

8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

8.0 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**

3 November 2014