

ASSESSOR'S QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



16 March 2015

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 3rd November 2014 – 1st March 2015

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 126,225 for the Scottish Independence Referendum in September. The current number of postal voters as at the publication of the Registers on 27th February 2015 is 120,206. Across the 4 constituent councils the absent vote numbers are:-

- East Lothian 14,491
- Edinburgh 70,610
- Midlothian 12,037
- West Lothian 23,068

2.1.2 Rolling Registration

Since my last report, there have been no rolling registration updates as the electoral timetable has been in canvass mode.

2.1.3 Transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

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

The IER “write out” commenced on the 15th October with 564,456 confirmation letters being sent to the Lothian electorate who had successfully matched to the Department of Work and Pensions database.

93,390 Invitations to Register (ITR) were sent to those electors whose details could not be matched asking them to submit applications to ensure they are fully registered under IER. 64,000 reminders were subsequently sent and a further 52,200 second reminders issued. Non-return of forms is costly for the Board in terms of staff time, printing and postage. We are required to carry out door to door canvassing of non-return which escalates costs considerably.

Household Enquiry Forms (HEF) were sent to 41,091 households where there were no electors registered. Similar to the stages with ITRs, 36,629 reminders were issued and 32,916 second reminders. In addition from the returned HEFs 10,052 electors were sent an Invitation to Register.

When an elector is added to the electoral register I am now required to send a letter of confirmation. 69,052 such letters have been issued following successful registration during the canvass period.

Where potential electors do not match to the DWP database I am required to request further evidence to ensure that they meet the prescribed protocols for registration under IER. A total of 4,057 request letters have been sent during the canvass period. This is a new task which is very time consuming.

The ITR form provides electors with the option to request an absent vote application form to be sent to them. 13,255 such application forms have been sent.

Our call centre has been busy since the start of the transitional canvass with 24,456 telephone calls being answered, this reached peaks of 2,040 per day on the first day of letter issue and 2,026 on the day the Household Notification Letters were issued. 11,273 emails have also been received during the canvass period with a peak of 1,394 per day reached at the start of the write out. We offered a telephone registration service and this has proved to be of assistance both to the electorate and efficiency of processing.

The canvass team carried out door to door calls throughout the canvass period seeking to achieve a registration response from non-responders. The canvassers utilised mobile technology where on line applications could be undertaken at the door with the elector. Since the start of the canvass until 27th February 2015 when the register was published the canvassers have made 38,376 door step canvass calls.

It is apparent that there has been a significant increase in electoral mailings as a result of IER. The staff have been required to work with the new electoral management system software which has caused concerns not only for Lothian staff but for all electoral practitioners throughout the UK. Improvements continue to be made and lessons learned through exchange of best practice.

The table below states the key comparators between electorate at publication of the register in 2014 and 2015.

Lothian Valuation Joint Board					
2014 and 2015 Canvass Statistics					
Council	Electorate as at 10 March 2014	Electorate as at 27 February	No. of Postal Voters as at 10 March 2014	No. of Postal Voters as at 27 February 2015	No. of Electors opting out of the Edited Register
City of Edinburgh	358,653	373,963	60,582	70,610	202,404
East Lothian	79,880	80,422	12,939	14,491	37,459
Midlothian	66,962	68,453	10,445	12,037	37,258
West Lothian	133,906	137,192	19,893	23,068	68,207
Totals	639,401	660,030	103,859	120,206	345,328

2.1.4 Ward 9 Armadale and Blackridge By-election 26 March 2015 Key Dates

3rd/4th March - Dispatch of Poll Cards

6th/7th March - Dispatch of postal ballot packs (first and main issue)

10th March - Deadline for receipt of registration applications (day -12)

11th March - Deadline for receipt of new postal or postal proxy applications, 5pm (day -11)

18th March - Deadline for receipt of new proxy applications, 5pm (day -6)

26th March - Deadline for emergency proxy applications, 5pm

2.1.5 United Kingdom Parliamentary General Election Key Dates

27th March – Last date for receipt of postal vote applications to be on the first issue of postal ballot packs.

31st March/1st April - Dispatch of Poll Cards

20th/21st April - Dispatch of postal ballot packs (first and main issue)

20th April - Deadline for receipt of registration applications (day -12)

21st April - Deadline for receipt of new postal or postal proxy applications, 5pm (day -11)

28th April - Deadline for receipt of new proxy applications, 5pm (day -6)

28th April - Dispatch of postal ballot packs (second issue for applications received after 27th March)

7th May - Deadline for emergency proxy applications, 5pm

It is important to note that although electors who have not been confirmed will remain on the electoral register they will not be able to apply to vote by post or proxy unless they are IER verified. The proxy as well as the elector needs to be IER verified. Electors must be encouraged to enter into the process as early as possible.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities March 2015 – June 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;
- Continue to process all other applications for example, opt out requests, postal vote applications etc. as necessary;
- Undertake all necessary preparations, providing information and data as necessary to the Returning Officer, for the by election in Ward 5 Armadale on the 26th March 2015 and
- Undertake all necessary preparations, providing information and data as necessary to the Returning Officers, for the UK Parliamentary general Election on the 7th May 2015.

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 3rd November 2014 – 1st March 2015

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 3rd November 2014 there were 401,463 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen very slightly to 402,576 as at 1st March 2015, an increase of 1,113 dwellings in 4 months. This figure can be compared to the same period in 2014 where 1,302 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 103 dwellings have been altered which compares to 70 altered bands during the same period in 2014.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 1,280 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings compared to 573 dwellings during the same period in 2014. 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 March 2015 there were 45 cases outstanding reduced from 76 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 March 2015 – June 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;
- Continue to provide advice and information to the Scottish Government, Commission on Local Tax Reform on request

4.0 NON DOMESTIC RATING OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

4.1 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Overview 3rd November 2014 – 1st March 2015

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 12/18 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 3rd November 2014 to 1st March 2015, there have been 341 additions, 414 valuation alterations and 293 deletions. This can be compared to the previous period in 2014 where there was 399 additions, 528 valuation alterations and 241 deletions.

4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals

During the period 3rd November to 1st March 2015, 189 appeals have been resolved. As at 1st March the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 280. 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 March 2015 – June 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.
- Commence analysis work in preparation for the 2017 Revaluation

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. A draft Absence Management Policy has been issued to Unison for comment

5.2 Staffing

One member of staff resigned during February and the recruitment for the vacancy is currently being progressed.

I have been advised that 2 members of staff expect to commence maternity leave mid-year.

I have employed 3 new replacement temporary Canvassers who took up post on 2nd March on a fixed term contract to June 2016 to ensure the IER door to door requirement can be fulfilled.

The contracts for the 10 temporary Customer Service Assistants have been extended to 8th May to cover the increased workload of the UKPGE.

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.

An equalities monitoring report is currently being prepared for submission to the Equalities Commission.

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

Remedial work has been actioned for the air conditioning system which at present is working effectively.

There continues to be a significant issue with the roof and specialist roofing contractors are currently being asked to provide quotes for repair.

We are in regular dialogue with our Facilities Management Company to ensure 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**

16 March 2015