

ASSESSOR'S SEPTEMBER 2015 PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



7 September 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 1st April 2015 – 28th August 2015

2.1.1 Absent Voters List

As at the publication of the Registers on 27th February 2015 the number of postal voters on the list was 120,206 compared to the current number which stands at 123,896. The current number of postal voters across the 4 constituent councils are approximately;-

- East Lothian 15,329
- Edinburgh 72,349
- Midlothian 12,613
- West Lothian 23,605

2.1.2 Rolling Registration

Since the register publication date to end August, during the rolling registration update periods, staff processed a total of 35,025 additions to the register, 38,555 removals and 4,547 amendments. To allow comparison to normal registration activity the number processed during the same period in 2014 was 24,202 additions to the register, 19,205 removals and 3,814 amendments.

2.1.3 UK Parliamentary General Election

The administration of the registers for the election progressed well with all tasks completed on time. The number of eligible electors on the Lothian registers for the election was 638,947 including 125,614 who opted for postal votes. A total of 17,574 electors were added to the register for the election by the closing date for applications.

The results of the General Election in May showed that in Scotland there was considerable engagement by the electorate. This was reflected not just at the ballot box but also through the electoral registration and associated processes.

For ERO's throughout the country this election held additional pressures as it was the first conducted after the recent introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). IER has resulted in major changes to the electoral management system used within the organisation and many of the internal procedures and processes that support the electoral activity have required to be re-engineered. Such recent changes place considerable additional pressure upon resources when coupled with a major election event.

IER also saw the introduction of on-line and telephone registration system. This has proved to be very successful with many electors and resulted in reduced numbers of paper applications being received. In many instances however the elector misunderstood the role of the on-line application system and thought it enabled an existing elector to check their registration status. This led to numerous duplicate registration applications being received. This was resolved by the introduction of various checking procedures.

From the 3rd April to Election Day we dealt with 13,158 telephone calls and 4,722 emails. Since the Call Centre went live on the 5th August 2014 we have dealt with 118,000 electoral registration telephone and email enquiries.

The impact on the register during this election period was significant with 10,068 electors being added during the period 27 February to 29 April. During the period 1st April to 21 April 11,382 additional postal vote applications were processed and applied. In the days leading up to the election 2,206 proxies were applied and 104 emergency proxies were approved. On Election Day itself 55 clerical errors were identified and the electors affected were able to cast their vote.

Following discussions with Returning Officers a new procedure was put in place on Election Day that enabled polling staff direct contact with senior staff within the ERO's office. 250 calls were received. This ensured that any registration enquiries encountered by polling staff could be quickly resolved.

2.1.4 Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act

Following the Scottish Independence Referendum, legislation was passed that shall allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote in Scottish Parliamentary elections from the 5th April 2016 and local government elections and referendums from 5th May 2016.

As a result, changes have been made to the 2015 canvass process that allows and encourages the provision of young person's information. The recently issued Household Enquiry Form provides information and guidance on who should provide information and the way in which this should be done. In addition the recently introduced online registration system has been altered in order that young persons can provide information through this mechanism.

Major changes have been required to electoral management IT systems in order to allow young person' registrations to be properly reflected on the electoral registers. At the request of the Scottish Government, LVJB has played a leading role in this process, offering advice on the technical requirements, providing project management, and scrutinising the costs that have arisen. All costs that relate to the alteration of electoral management systems resulting from this change to the electoral franchise are being met, through Lothain VJB, by the Scottish Government.

As we progress towards publication of the register in December 2015 and the Scottish Parliamentary election in May 2016 we shall be engaging with education authorities and schools directly to ensure every opportunity is made available for young persons to register. The Electoral Commission in Scotland is focusing registration publicity and events on young person registration and where possible we shall be participating in this process.

2.1.5 2015 Canvass

On the 3rd August we commenced the issue of 360,000 Household Enquiry Forms (HEF). This is the annual canvass process as required under the regime of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Following its completion we shall publish the revised register on 1st December 2015.

While this process is very much ongoing, with the issue of first reminders due on the 2nd September, early assessments are that the return rate of information is slightly down on the levels reached under the pre-IER canvass process. This could be for a number of reasons ranging from difficulties with understanding and completing the Household Enquiry Form to elector apathy following a very intense period of election activity. Unfortunately the percentage of the electorate engaging electronically which is more efficient and cost effective has also reduced

The form itself is in most parts prescribed by legislation and little scope exists to make alterations. However, for the reminder issue we have created an insert leaflet that explains clearly to the elector how and by what methods a return can be made. Although the insert is an additional cost it is hoped that a higher return rate by electronic means will justify the additional expense. In addition our canvass team has recently commenced doorstep activity in areas of high non-return seeking a completion of the HEF and where appropriate the registration of those persons eligible.

The Board shall be kept apprised of the final canvass outcome in future reports.

2.1.6 End Date for the Transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

On 16th July 2015 the Parliamentary Secretary, John Penrose MP, wrote to all Electoral Registration Officers announcing that he would bring forward the end date for the transition to IER to December 2015. As a result it is likely that legislation shall shortly come into force that requires the removal of all unconfirmed electors from the electoral register prior to its publication on the 1st December 2015.

Unconfirmed electors are those electors that were unable to be matched with DWP records during the transition phase of IER. These electors are required to complete an Invitation to Register application and thereby ensure that they remain on the register. During 2014 canvass each unconfirmed elector would have received up to three invitations to register. Each unconfirmed elector was similarly written to prior to the UK Parliamentary General Election and a further three invitations to register during the 2015 canvass.

Prior to the commencement of the 2015 Household canvass there were 34,000 unconfirmed electors within Lothian. While it is anticipated that the canvass process shall impact on this number either through removal of electors no longer resident or by their successful registration under IER it is intended to undertake specific activity to approach these electors. A small amount of additional funding has been made available by the Cabinet Office that shall allow the following activities;- specific targeted evening and weekend doorstep canvass, evening contact via telephone where contact details exist, and the issue of letters providing detailed and specific information that indicates clearly the outcome for non-completion of an application.

The Board shall receive further information at future meetings in respect of final unconfirmed elector numbers.

2.1.7 Lothian By-Elections

Following the UK Parliamentary General Election on 7th May 2014 3 by-elections have been called in Lothian. Key dates associated with these are noted below.

	Polling Day	Last Date to Register
City of Edinburgh Council, Ward 12, Leith Walk	10 September	25 August
Midlothian Council, Ward 4, Midlothian West	10 September	25 August
West Lothian Council, Ward 1, Linlithgow	1 October	15 September

2.1.8 Electoral Commission Performance Monitoring

I was one of four Scottish Electoral Registration Officers randomly chosen to submit performance standards for the City of Edinburgh Council Area. The following response has been received;-

'It was a pleasure to read through your documents which demonstrate a high level of attention to detail in your planning. We are very happy that you have appropriate processes and documentation in place to deliver the annual canvass.'

The plan talks about undertaking partnership work to reach the target groups, i.e. with community groups, housing associations and so forth. However at the time of submitting the plans, contact were still to be made with some of the potential partners. Once the partnership work have been formalised it would be great if you could provide us with some examples of who you will be working with to reach your target groups'.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities September 2015 – December 2015

2.2.1 The service priorities over the next 3 months

- Conclude the household canvass, processing all applications received
- Publish the Electoral Register on 1st December 2015
- Continue processing all received applications such as registration applications, postal vote requests, change's to opt out status, change of name etc.
- Continue all doorstep canvass requirements as required under IER
- Undertake all preparations, providing information and data as necessary to the Returning Officers for the purposes of forthcoming by-elections
- Continue engagement activities to encourage registration by 16/17year olds

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 1st April 2015 – 28th August 2015

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 1st April 2015 there were 402,725 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen slightly to 403,975 as at 28th August 2015, an increase of 1,250 dwellings in 5 months. This figure can be compared to the same period in 2014 where 1,307 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 90 dwellings have been altered which compares to 77 altered bands during the same period in 2014.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 1,114 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings compared to 1,136 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 April 2015 there were 47 cases outstanding. As at 28th August 2015 there

were 51 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 Local Tax Commission

The Scottish Government has set up a Commission to consider options for a Council Tax replacement. Lothian has played a role in providing oral evidence, preparing and submitting responses to consultations, informal meetings and data requests for research purposes.

The Commission is due to publish their report which will provide information on the various options available but not give recommendations. A replacement tax is unlikely to be decided prior to the Scottish Parliamentary elections in May 2016.

It is hoped that the future of Council Tax and the implications for my organisation will be clearer by summer 2016 thus ending many years of uncertainty.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities September 2015 – December 2015

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

- Update my records by carrying out the survey of Council Tax subjects which have been altered and not sold and
- 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 1st April 2015 – 28th August 2015

4.1.1 2010 Revaluation Appeals

The number of 2010 Revaluation appeals outstanding at Lands Tribunal has reduced significantly as a result of reaching agreement on value levels for Health Centres, Clinics and Surgeries, the Shinetsu Wafer Fabrication Factory and Edinburgh Airport. The remaining appeals listed at Lands Tribunal for Scotland include, David Lloyd Tennis Centres, Ikea, Telecommunication subjects and an Oil Pipeline.

4.1.2 Running Roll

Professional and technical staff have continued to survey and value subjects that have been newly constructed, altered or demolished. From 1st April 2015 to 22nd August 2015, there have been 620 additions, 649 valuation alterations and 338 deletions. This can be compared to the previous period in 2014 where there was 644 additions, 642 valuation alterations and 332 deletions.

4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals

During the period 1st April to 28th August 2015, 250 appeals have been resolved. As at 28th August the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 636 of which majority refer to appeals lodged following the reduced drink drive alcohol limit. Courts to deal with this type of appeal are scheduled to continue through the rest of the calendar year.

4.1.4 2017 Revaluation

Work towards publishing the 2017 revaluation roll has commenced in earnest. Questionnaires issue has commenced with self-catering accommodation and independent petrol filling stations. Cost questionnaires continue to be issued on a regular basis to principally allow contractors valuations to be carried out. Similarly the main issue of rent questionnaires has been issued. Return rates are very poor and we continue to strive to improve the data we hold to facilitate continued analyses for all types of subject categories.

In Lothian we aim to have up to 50% of our subjects with draft valuations by end January 2016, 75% by end June and 100% by end September 2016.

4.1.5 Scottish Government Consultations and Bills Affecting Non-Domestic Rates

The Scottish Government has just launched a 'consultation on non-domestic rates: setting decapitalisation rates for the 2017 revaluation' to which a response will be submitted. The conclusion of the consultation and resultant prescription of decapitalisation rates is an essential element required in the valuation of contractors based valuations. Lothian continues to take an active part in this consultation.

On 22nd June the Scottish Parliament introduced the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill to make provision for non-domestic rates to be levied on shootings and deer forests. If enacted this could potentially require Lothian to value some 350 new subjects in the valuation roll from 1st April 2017. Lothian has continued to take an active part in this consultation.

The responses to the 'Supporting Business – Promoting Growth consultation' are still being analysed by the Scottish Government. Changes in legislation are unlikely come in to effect before 1st April 2017 but will almost certainly require work by assessors prior to that date. Similar to the above 2 consultations Lothian has taken an active part.

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities September – December 2015

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 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;
- Continue to analyse rents and costs in preparation for the 2017 Revaluation and
- Continue to derive rates and carry out valuations in preparation for the 2017 Revaluation.

5.0 HUMAN RESOURCES AND OFFICE MANAGEMENT

5.1 UNISON

Regular JCC meetings continue to be held and no substantive issues have been raised by Unison.

Policies are timetabled for review to ensure that all policies meet current legislative, management and staff requirements. I anticipate having the updated Code of Conduct for Employees Policy and Absence Management Procedure agreed with Unison in September and submitted to the Board for approval at the next meeting.

The Information Management and Security Policy has been updated ready for submission with the Records Management Plan to the Keeper of the Records.

5.2 Staffing

As stated previously, in July 2014 we recruited 12 temporary canvass staff, 10 temporary call centre staff and 2 temporary mail support staff. To cope with the intense canvass period from August through to December 2014 we advertised and employed an additional 4 canvassers. Because of the temporary nature of the job the numbers continue to fluctuate and recruitment is becoming more difficult. At the present time the numbers have reduced to 12 canvassers, 1 mail support and 3 call centre staff.

1 member of staff has retired on ill-health grounds effective from 11 June 2015.

Cover arrangements are in place for 2 members of staff currently on maternity leave.

5.3 Equalities

The Equalities Mainstream Report was compiled and submitted in line with legislative requirements.

5.4 Records Management

The Keeper of the Records of Scotland wrote to me on 3rd June 2015 requesting that I submit my Records Management Plan no later than 30th October 2015, this requirement is set out in section 1(1) of the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011. The Records Management Group has continued to develop a policy, plan, retention and disposal schedules and associated documentation.

The required documentation is almost finalised and I will submit by the due date as required.

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 in developing a mobile tablet solution for use by canvassers carrying out door to door activity. The mobile devices have continued to be updated providing greater functionality thereby increasing productivity and efficiency.

The IT team have also been heavily involved in developing new and improved systems to make the function of analyses and valuation more efficient and effective for the 2017 Revaluation.

As the organisation builds on its IT usage the team are required to remain up to date with modern technology and seek ways to improve and assist in our service delivery. Training has been provided to ensure the appropriate skill sets are available, to this end My IT Support manager has agreed to improve his knowledge by taking an MSC Advanced Security and Cybercrime at Napier which will assist with maintaining PSN/IER requirements.

7.0 BUILDING ISSUES

7.1 Building Maintenance

I have continued to have problems with my office building but I am now pleased to report that I have had a very positive meeting with the landlord and steps are now being made to rectify many outstanding issues. I hope to have all repairs carried out before the winter months arrive.

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

7 September 2015