

ASSESSOR'S NOVEMBER 2015 PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



16 November 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 29th August 2015 – 31st October 2015

2.1.1 2015 Canvass

On the 3rd August we commenced the issue of 357,238 Household Enquiry Forms (HEF) as the first step in 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.

190,545 first reminders were issued between 1st and 3rd September and 118,087 second reminders were issued on 30th September. We have continually assessed the return rate which is lower than the levels reached under the pre-IER canvass process. As I mentioned in my last Board report the percentage of the electorate engaging electronically, which is more efficient and cost effective, has also reduced. As a result of this poor response it was decided to issue a third reminder in an attempt to gain a more complete and accurate 1st December electoral register. 85,500 third reminder forms were issued during the first week in November, I will assess the effectiveness of this additional step at the conclusion of the canvass.

As I have previously mentioned, the form itself is in most parts prescribed by legislation and little scope exists to make alterations. The insertion of a simple explanatory leaflet with the form at the first reminder did little to increase the return. Advertising and publicity events have likewise not been cost effective. In particular, my staff took part in an event called Holyrood Rocks, this was run by the Scottish Political & Cultural Partnership and supported by the Electoral Commission, and was aimed at the younger generation. The event was held on a Friday evening and cost the Board approximately £450 in overtime pay and expenses with the only outcome being one person registering to vote.

When names are added to the returned HEF I am required to send an Invitation to Register (ITR) to any new or altered name advised. Only on return of the ITR or an on-line application can I add any potential elector to the register. The return rates for ITR forms is particularly low and this is similar across the country. We will continue to do what we can to get those who are eligible to register, registered.

Another concern is the low numbers of young persons registering. I have written to or emailed all young persons known to me requesting that they register. I have subsequently asked Chief Executives of the 4 Council areas to encourage Head Teachers to make an announcement at school assemblies etc. about the need to register.

2.1.2 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 123,459. The current number of postal voters across the 4 constituent councils are approximately;-

- East Lothian 15,288
- Edinburgh 72,086
- Midlothian 12,553
- West Lothian 23,532

A number of requests for absent votes made on ITRs are still being processed.

2.1.3 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.

Prior to the commencement of the 2015 Household canvass there were 34,000 unconfirmed electors within Lothian. As expected the canvass process has helped to reduce this number either through removal of electors no longer resident or by their successful registration under IER.

A small amount of additional funding was made available by the Cabinet Office which was used to carry out some specific targeted 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.

There has been a lot of media attention regarding an expected large fall off of electors at 1st December, to keep you properly informed, the expected final unconfirmed elector numbers in Lothian at present are approximately;-

- East Lothian 332
- Edinburgh 2,776
- Midlothian 276
- West Lothian 680

2.1.4 Lothian By-Elections

Following the UK Parliamentary General Election on 7th May 2015 three by-elections were called in Lothian.

	Polling Day
City of Edinburgh Council, Ward 12, Leith Walk	10 September
Midlothian Council, Ward 4, Midlothian West	10 September
West Lothian Council, Ward 1, Linlithgow	1 October

All elections went smoothly with no negative affect on the annual canvass.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities November 2015 – February 2016

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;
- Continue engagement activities to encourage registration by 16/17year olds;
- Carry out the refresh of signatures for absent voters whose signatures are now five years old, and
- Commence preparation work for the 2016 Scottish Parliamentary election.

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 29th August 2015 – 31st October 2016

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 28th August 2015 there were 403,975 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen to 405,340 as at 31st October 2015, an increase of 1,365 dwellings in 2 months. This figure can be compared to the same period in 2014 where 812 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 53 dwellings have been altered which compares to 54 altered bands during the same period in 2014.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 521 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings compared to 463 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 28th August 2015 there were 51 cases outstanding. As at 31st October 2015 there were 56 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

As I have mentioned before the Scottish Government set up a Commission to consider options for a Council Tax replacement. I continue to provide support for the evidence gathering exercise.

The Commission is due to publish their report in the very near future which will provide information on the various options available. 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 Autumn 2016 thus ending many years of uncertainty.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities November 2015 – February 2016

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 29th August 2015 – 31st October 2015

4.1.1 2010 Revaluation Appeals

The number of 2010 Revaluation appeals outstanding at Lands Tribunal has further reduced since my last report with the David Lloyd Tennis Centres now resolved. The remaining appeals listed at Lands Tribunal for Scotland include 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 29th August 2015 to 31st October 2015 there have been 175 additions, 167 valuation alterations and 129 deletions. This can be compared to the previous period in 2014 where there was 176 additions, 232 valuation alterations and 243 deletions.

4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals

During the period 29th August 2015 to 31st October 2015, 100 appeals have been resolved. As at 31st October the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 595 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 continues for all subject categories. 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 August 2016.

4.1.5 Scottish Government Consultations and Bills Affecting Non-Domestic Rates

A response to the Scottish Government ‘consultation on non-domestic rates: setting decapitalisation rates for the 2017 revaluation’ is being drafted and will be submitted by the due date. 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. The Bill was referred back for further consideration and possible amendment.

The responses to the 'Supporting Business – Promoting Growth consultation' have now been analysed by the Scottish Government. The analysis was published mid September and we await the views of the Scottish Parliament on the outcomes they may propose.

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities November 2015 – February 2016

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. Concern has been raised about the operation of the VERA Procedure and lack of time to consult on new and reviewed policies.

Policies are timetabled for review to ensure that all policies meet current legislative, management and staff requirements. This timetable is to be shared with the Trade Union in the hope that appropriate time for consultation can be agreed and actioned. I have the updated Code of Conduct for Employees Policy, Recruitment & Selection and Absence Management Procedure under a separate report to the Board for approval.

5.2 Staffing

As stated previously, the introduction of IER has led to a review of our staffing requirements. As the future of the current IER processes are still under review the staff required for the task are recruited on a temporary basis. At the present time the numbers are 13 canvassers, 1 mail support and 4 call centre staff.

To meet the budget requirements for 2016/17 I considered it necessary to canvass staff to assess their desire to leave the organisation in terms of the VERA policy. I received numerous notes of interest which I considered with my senior management team, studied the business case and concluded my decision based on cost efficiencies and business continuity. My proposed offer of VERA to three staff was agreed with the Treasurer who confirmed support. I should say that the trade union expressed their dissatisfaction at the further reduction to the staff complement.

In adherence with the VERA Procedure section 6.5 states; for cases with a salary up to £50,000 approval is given by the Assessor on the Joint Board's behalf. Section 6.6 states that all approved cases will be reported to the Joint Board and included in an annual report to the Joint Board. As the salary of the three members of staff are below £50,000 I have approved the applications and now complete the procedure by reporting to the Board.

5.3 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 following documentation was submitted by the due date as required;-

- Records Management Policy
- Records Management Plan
- Records Retention & Disposal Policy
- Records Retention & Disposal Schedule

I have placed the documentation on the LVJB website and await comments from the Keeper of the Records which I expect to have by end November.

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 involved in developing a forms management system which should greatly assist with the numerous forms being issued and returned in preparation for the 2017 revaluation. They continue to develop the valuation systems to automate some valuation processes and to ensure values for the 2017 can be uploaded to our in-house valuation system and the Scottish Assessors website.

7.0 BUILDING ISSUES

7.1 Building Maintenance

The grounds maintenance is now being carried out appropriately. Contractors have visited my office and I hope to have roof and internal repairs carried out prior to the end of the year.

8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

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**

16 November 2015