

ASSESSOR'S PROGRESS REPORT TO THE LOTHIAN VALUATION JOINT BOARD

4th November 2019

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise and update members on service overview, performance and priorities.

2.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

2.1 2019 Annual Household Canvass

The 2019 Household canvass is currently ongoing and shall conclude in advance of the Register publication date of 1 December 2019.

The table below shows the ER Annual Household Enquiry Form return rates at as 11/10/19

Council Area	Initial HEFs issued	HEFs returned	%
City of Edinburgh	248,074	176,431	71.12%
Midlothian	41,254	31,746	76.95%
West Lothian	80,739	59,926	74.22%
East Lothian	48,835	37,910	77.63%
Totals	418,902	306,013	73.05%

At this stage the current prediction is for similar return rate to the 2018 canvass where a rate of 75% was achieved.

Of the returns received by 11 October, 147,444 were in paper format and 158,569 were received via all other channels including web, text, phone and returns from door to door visits.

Return of canvass forms can give rise to the issue of Invitation to Register forms (ITR). During this year's canvass we have posted 29,656 ITR's, emailed an additional 10,956, followed up with 33,431 1st and 2nd paper reminders, and 1,128 email reminders.

The current Absent Vote list stands at 121,380 which is slightly down from the 1 December 2018 position of 121,991.

2.2 ER Canvass Reform – Update

Preparations are continuing in advance of the reforms to the 2020 annual household canvass. The Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations have been drafted and are expected to come in to force at the end of this year. These regulations will allow a test of the national data matching exercise (Electoral Register data to DWP data) to commence in early 2020.

As part of the preparation for these changes we are undertaking a test of local data sets to help identify their data quality and currency in relation the information contained in the electoral register.

Each of our four constituent authorities have provided council tax data which will be used to check against electoral register data as at the start of the 2019 canvass and then again at conclusion of the canvass. The effectiveness of the local data shall be assessed in terms of an improved match rate between pre and post canvass data. We will shortly evaluate the results of this test and these outcomes will help inform our overall strategy for the matching process.

We have also undertaken some initial cost modelling work to try to identify the level of cost savings that could be made however this modelling exercise will be further and more accurately informed following the national data matching exercise in early 2020.

IER funding allocation from the Cabinet Office for 2019/2020 is £228k. As CO funding will cease next year the focus is on the development of the new canvass approach and the options it offers, so as to remove this additional funding overhead from 2020 onwards.

2.3 Elector Engagement

During the annual household canvass period elector engagement activities have placed additional emphasis on promoting the importance of returning the Household Enquiry Form, using face-to-face events as well as social media, TV and radio advertising.

Additionally, the reporting period has coincided with the commencement of the University year. With over 60,000 students attending Edinburgh and Lothian based higher education institutions this poses a significant challenge for electoral administrators. The Engagement Officer has worked in partnership with members of Student's Associations in order to promote student voter registration.

Noted below are some of the recent activities undertaken by the Engagement Officer;

- Attendance at Edinburgh MELA Festival to allow people to return Household Enquiry Forms and check if they are registered;
- Voter registration drop-in sessions held at each of the 4 City of Edinburgh Locality Offices;
- Voter registration drop-in sessions held in various locations in East Lothian, Midlothian and West Lothian;
- Social media messaging through the @ERO_LothianVJB and constituent council's twitter feeds and TV & radio advertising to encourage return of Household Enquiry Form;
- Email issued to occupiers in low return areas to prompt return of Household Enquiry Form;
- Voter registration stalls at each of the 4 Universities Freshers' Fairs to register new students and promote voter registration;
- Posters displayed at Halls of Residences and advertising placed in Student's Association information publications promoting the online registration process;
- Attendance at Citizenship Ceremonies to register newly qualified electors and assist in the return of Household Enquiry Forms if necessary;
- Over 8,500 ITR's issued to new Council Tax Payers using Data Mining program.

2.4 Service Priorities

- Continue contingency planning for major electoral event(s)
- Conclude the annual household canvass, process all returned information as necessary and publish the revised Electoral register on 1 December 2019.
- Continue processing all applications received, such as ITR registration forms, absent vote applications etc.
- Continue doorstep activity in respect of outstanding ITR's
- Carry out absent vote signature refresh (January – February)
- Continue with, and further develop, elector engagement activities
- Continue to assess and model the impact of the proposed new canvass reform programme

3.0 COUNCIL TAX

The maintenance of the Council Tax List is a constant activity and the table below indicates the number of new inserts, by Council area, made to the List during the period 1st April to 20th October 2019. In addition the level of performance achieved is also shown.

Band	Edinburgh	Midlothian	West Lothian	East Lothian	Total
A	30	4	10	1	45
B	166	9	123	24	322
C	286	59	120	72	537
D	448	38	107	130	723
E	374	34	143	75	626
F	120	105	133	118	476
G	164	82	30	164	440
H	57	1	2	5	65
Total	1,645	332	668	589	3,234

The level of performance in relation to the associated key performance indicators are shown below. These indicators are for the period 1st April 2019 until the 30th September 2019 and based on the 2,954 inserts between these two dates.

KPI	Less than 3 months	3 to 6 months	Greater than 6 months
Actual	93.20%	5.01%	1.79%

At the current time we have 99 outstanding council tax appeals. The majority will be resolved without the need for a formal citation and those remaining will likely be cited for hearing towards the end of the year.

The use of external field devices for the collection of house data has now been successfully deployed and this approach is in use for all new house estates. The second phase that shall allow the remote update to core systems is now in the testing phase. If testing goes as expected a full release is anticipated by the end of November.

4.0 NON-DOMESTIC RATING

4.1 2017 Revaluation Appeals

The continuing disposal of NDR appeals lodged following the 2017 revaluation remains a major focus. To date 8,875 revaluation appeals have been disposed of along with 857 running roll appeals, with a further 1,229 revaluation and 228 running roll appeals under citation by the end of the year. This shall mean that the end of year position shall be that of the 13,007 revaluation appeals lodged, 10,104 shall have been dealt with leaving 2,904 (22.3%) for disposal during 2020.

A draft 2020 timetable for disposal has been compiled with an anticipated finish date of October 2020, allowing some time for continuations before the statutory end date of 31st December 2020. The concentration so far has been on large class subjects such as shops, offices, industrials and licensed subjects. There are still a number of appeals relating to

these bulk class properties outstanding however moving forward the emphasis will move towards more specialised subjects.

The table below provides more information on revaluation appeal disposal.

1 st April 2017 to 23 rd October 2019	Total Appeals Received (2017 RV)	Total Appeals Closed	% of RV Appeals Closed	Number of Appeals Withdrawn or Dismissed	% of Appeals Withdrawn	Number of Appeals Adjusted	% of Appeals Adjusted
Edinburgh	8,343	6,642	79.6%	4,635	69.7%	2,007	30.3%
Midlothian	1,059	701	66.2%	463	66.0%	238	34.0%
West Lothian	2,499	1,674	67.0%	1,216	72.6%	458	27.4%
East Lothian	1,107	628	56.7%	484	77.1%	144	22.9%
Total	13,008	9,645	74.1%	6,798	70.4%	2,847	29.6%

4.2 2019 Running Roll

The maintenance of the Valuation Roll is an essential annual activity. This ensures the Roll itself and entries it contains remain current by the insertion and deletion of entries, and amendment to reflect property splits and mergers, and the impact of physical alterations of material consequence.

The table below provides an indication of the number and types of changes made to the Roll since 1st April 2019.

	Shops	Offices/ Car Spaces	Industrial	Licensed	Self-Catering	Premises Under Reconstruction	Other Subjects
Edinburgh	76	365	100	27	250	78	204
Midlothian	3	15	29	4	8	5	40
West Lothian	12	52	101	2	11	22	87
East Lothian	10	22	18	3	31	5	73
Total	101	454	248	36	300	110	404

There were also 1,300 name changes processed along with the issue of 3,831 commercial rental evidence forms of which 1,509 were subsequently returned.

In addition the performance associated with the principal maintenance activities is shown.

	< 3 months	3 – 6 months	> 6 months	Total
01/04/19 – 30/09/19	82.23%	11.86%	5.91%	1,593
01/04/18 – 30/09/18	72.41%	23.28%	4.21%	1,591

The maintenance of the Roll is a resource hungry activity and competes with appeal disposal in terms of workforce allocation. During 2019/20 a number of initiatives are under way in order to alleviate some of this pressure while maintaining/improving performance.

Altered work practices have been put in place where the emphasis has changed from being reactive to proactive with regard to certain amendments to the valuation roll that occur on a regular basis. These changes allow for the better use of resources and current indications suggest, improved performance.

5.0 FINANCIAL STATEMENT

5.1 Budget 2019/20 Projected Outturn

The Treasurer's report indicates a projected budget outturn of £17k overspend. The start of year projection of circa £160k overspend is being minimised as a result of following budgetary and vacancy control.

The Board shall require to consider the options available at financial year end should the year end position remain at the projected overspend position.

5.2 Business Strategy 2020/23

The Board has been provided with an update on the Business Strategy elsewhere on the agenda. Work shall continue over the coming months to provide further detail on the actions being taken to meet the various challenges outlined.

An external facing meeting of the Governance Group was held on the 24th September at which the 3 year budget projection and the various options for mitigating the financial impact over this period were discussed including the development of the proposed Business Strategy. It was agreed that a further meeting of the group would be advisable to monitor progress in this regard. Accordingly a meeting of the Governance Group has been scheduled for the 3rd December 2019. An update report shall be presented to the Board at its next meeting on the 3rd February 2020.

6.0 RECOMMENDATION

The Board is requested to note the contents of this report.

Graeme Strachan
ASSESSOR & ERO