

ASSESSOR'S SEPTEMBER 2016 PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD

5 September 2016

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 2016 – 21st August 2016

2.1.1 Absent Voters List

As at the publication of the Registers on 1st December 2015 the number of postal voters on the list was 120,328 compared to the current number which stands at 140,795. The current number of postal voters across the 4 constituent councils are approximately;-

- East Lothian 17,488
- Edinburgh 83,003
- Midlothian 14,005
- West Lothian 26,299

2.1.2 Rolling Registration

Since the register publication date to end August, during the rolling registration update periods, staff processed a total of 70,938 additions to the register, 39,506 removals and 1,907 amendments. To allow comparison to normal registration activity the number processed during the same period in 2015 was 35,025 additions to the register, 38,555 removals and 4,547 amendments. As I have previously mentioned the updating of the electoral registers is now a year long exercise as opposed to the 3 month task prior to IER.

2.1.3 Scottish Parliamentary General Election 5th May 2016

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 650,892 including 127,001 who opted for postal votes.

There was considerable engagement by the electorate for the Election in May. This was reflected not just at the ballot box with good voter turnout but also through the electoral registration and associated processes.

During the Election period our call centre team dealt with 10,882 telephone calls and 4,912 emails.

The impact on the register during this election period was significant with 25,504 electors being added. During the period 21st March to 19th April 11,749 additional absent vote applications were processed and applied. In the days leading up to the election 66 emergency proxies were approved. On Election Day itself 35 clerical errors were identified and the electors affected were able to cast their vote.

On Election Day polling staff were able to make direct contact with senior staff within the ERO's office. 202 calls were received. This ensured that any registration enquiries encountered by polling staff could be quickly resolved.

2.1.4 European Union Referendum 23rd June 2016

Similar to the Scottish Parliamentary Election the administration of the registers for the Referendum progressed well. The number of eligible electors on the Lothian registers for the Referendum was 620,218 including 128,737 who opted for postal votes.

During the Referendum period we dealt with 13,582 telephone calls and 8,173 emails. Surprisingly the number of enquiries was greater for the Referendum than the SP General Election.

The impact on the register during this election period was significant with 21,771 electors being added. During the period 20th April to 8th June, 21,095 additional absent vote applications were processed and applied. In the days leading up to the election 136 emergency proxies were approved. On Election Day itself 24 clerical errors were identified and the electors affected were able to cast their vote.

On Referendum Day polling staff were again able to make direct contact with senior staff within the ERO's office. 310 calls were received. This ensured that any registration enquiries encountered by polling staff could be quickly resolved.

You may recall that the on-line digital service went down just prior to the registration deadline. The legislation was very quickly amended to move the deadline by 48 hours thus minimising any possible disenfranchisement of potential electors. This created additional work and the very unusual position that the absent vote deadline was prior to the registration deadline. The effect of this change was primarily in printing registers for the Returning Officers to place in their ballot boxes. I am pleased to say that with key staff willing to work the weekend the printing was all completed to the satisfaction of the Returning Officers.

2.1.5 2016 Canvass

On the 1st August we commenced the issue of 405,592 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 2016.

While this process is very much ongoing, with the issue of first reminders due on the 1st September, early assessments are that the return rate of information is slightly improved on the levels reached at the same point last year. The return rate from the first issue has increased by 5%.

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

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities September 2016 – December 2016

2.2.1 The service priorities over the next 3 months

- Conclude the household canvass, processing all applications received
- Publish the revised Electoral Register on 1st December 2016
- 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 in particular amongst under-registered groups

2.3 Electoral Registration Update from Brian Brown Head of Administration and Depute ERO

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 1st April 2016 – 19th August 2016

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 1st April 2016 there were 407,012 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen slightly to 408,402 as at 19th August 2016, an increase of 1,390 dwellings in 5 months. This figure can be compared to the same period in 2015 where 1,250 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 78 dwellings have been altered which compares to 90 altered bands during the same period in 2015.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 818 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings compared to 1,114 dwellings during the same period in 2015. 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 2016 there were 73 cases outstanding. As at 19th August 2016 there were 98 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 you are aware the Scottish Government set up a Commission to consider options for a Council Tax replacement and they subsequently published their report on 14th December.

In March 2016 the Scottish Government published its proposals for reform of Council Tax. It is anticipated that these proposals (to vary the rates collected in bands E-H) will be taken forward via an affirmative Scottish Statutory instrument (SSI) which it is hoped will be laid in Parliament in early September. Once laid the Local Government and Communities Committee will only have 3-4 weeks in which to consider and report on this SSI. As President of IRRV Scotland I have been invited to give evidence to the Committee on the morning of 21 September.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities September 2016 – December 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 1st April 2016 – 19th August 2016

I shall state at the start of this report that I have prioritised the valuation workload to give priority to the task of Revaluation. General maintenance of the valuation roll has therefore been set aside for most of the last 5 months.

4.1.1 2010 Revaluation Appeals

The number of 2010 Revaluation appeals outstanding at Lands Tribunal is very low. The remaining appeals include Ikea and Telecommunication subjects.

4.1.2 Running Roll

Professional and technical staff have continued, to a very limited extent, to survey and value subjects that have been newly constructed, altered or demolished. From 1st April 2016 to 19th August 2016, there have been 346 additions, 229 valuation alterations and 323 deletions. This can be compared to the previous period in 2015 where there was 620 additions, 649 valuation alterations and 338 deletions.

4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals

During the period 1st April to 19th August 2016, 2 appeals have been resolved. As at 19th August the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 162. Courts to deal with the outstanding appeals are scheduled for November and December.

2 decisions of the Local Valuation Appeal Panel have been appealed by the Ratepayers and are currently progressing through the process to be heard by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court. The cases involve a Research centre occupied by Edinburgh Pharmaceuticals and a Guest House located in Roslin.

4.1.4 2017 Revaluation

Work towards publishing the 2017 revaluation roll has progressed in earnest. Questionnaires were issued to ingather data required to analyse the information about all types of property that requires to be valued. Return rates have been very poor and even at this late stage we continue to strive to improve the data we hold to facilitate continued analyses and and improve Rateable Value accuracy for all types of subject categories.

Practice Notes have been drafted to assist staff with the analysis and valuation process and all practice notes will be made available on the SAA website. Lothian together with our colleagues across Scotland have been heavily involved in drafting the documents and ensuring consistency of approach across subject categories.

The Scottish Government has requested that the SAA provide them with draft RVs for all subjects by 30th September this year to allow them to carry out modelling for reliefs, poundages etc.

In Lothian there are currently 32,538 subjects on the Valuation Roll. As at 19th August 26,783 of those subjects have been revalued, theoretically leaving 5,770 still to be revalued.

Progress has been hampered by late notification of proposed decapitalisation rates and by the length of time to receive legal Opinion regarding a Supreme Court case Woolway (VO) v Mazars LLP (2015).

The legal Opinion will have the effect of creating approximately 5,000 extra entries in the Revaluation Roll. The creation of those entries is particularly time consuming and adds to the revaluation.

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 received Royal Assent on 22nd April this year. This legislation will re-introduce 'Shootings' to the Valuation Roll. The analysis and valuation of this category of subject will be carried out after 30th September for hopeful completion by 31st March 2017.

4.1.5 Scottish Government Consultations and Bills Affecting Non-Domestic Rates

The Scottish Government has just launched a consultation on Transitional Relief '2017 Non-domestic Rating Revaluation – Consultation on Possible Transitional Arrangements' to which a response will be submitted by the Scottish Assessors Association (SAA).

Further to the Scottish Government consultation 'Supporting Business – Promoting Growth' a further review 'Barclay Review of Business Rates in Scotland' is taking place. The Barclay review group has been set up to make recommendations that seek to enhance and reform the business rates system in Scotland to better support business growth and long term investment and reflect changing market places. The Group is due to report to Ministers in July 2017.

As President of IRRV Scotland I have been invited to contribute to the review so and will attend a roundtable meeting later in September.

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities September – December 2016

The service priorities in Non-Domestic Rating are:-

- Finalise draft Rateable Values for all properties currently in the Valuation Roll by 30th September;
- Carry out RV audit to improve accuracy and consistency of Rateable Values prior to publication of draft RVs scheduled for mid-December.

- Identify, survey and value subjects to be created as a result of a recent Supreme Court Opinion by 30th September;
- Identify, survey and value 'Shooting Rights';
- 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 and
- Continue to update databases and analysis with rent, cost, turnover and throughput.

4.3 Non-Domestic Rating Update from Nick Chapman Head of Valuation

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.

Unison has expressed their concern at the current levels of staffing and the workload required to carry out our statutory duties.

5.2 Staffing

Temporary staff numbers continue to fluctuate as is expected from the non-permanent nature of the posts. I continue to try to maintain 12 canvassers on an annual basis with 3 additional canvassers during the August to November household canvass period. Likewise I continue to try to maintain 6 Customer Support Assistants.

In addition 3 Referencers have been recruited on temporary contracts to the end of November 2016 assisting with Revaluation 2017 tasks.

1 member of staff has resigned and moved to a post within Midlothian Council. It is intended to fill the vacancy in the near future.

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

We are now in year 2 of using mobile devices (ipads) for all electoral household canvass. This is a process which previously we hired over two hundred canvassers and the task is now achieved with 12/15 full time staff. The facility is proving so effective and efficient that we are now trialing a bespoke solution with our 3 temporary Referencers for simple survey work with a view to extend into more complex areas of work where possible.

This system allows work allocation in the field which minimises wasted time travelling to and from the office and also enhances the working day capabilities

7.0 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

5 September 2016