

# ASSESSOR'S NOVEMBER 2016 PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD



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**28 November 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 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2016 – 18<sup>th</sup> November 2016**

#### **2.1.1 2016 Canvass**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> August we commenced the issue of 405,592 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 2016. This year we are encouraging recipients to accept the registers in electronic format to reduce printing and postage time and costs.

173,676 first reminders were issued between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> September and 107,175 second reminders were issued on 30<sup>th</sup> September/1<sup>st</sup> October this compares to 190,545 first reminders and 118,087 second reminders issued during the same period in 2015. We have continually assessed the return rate which remains 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 increased from 90,479 in 2015 to 106,212 in 2016.

As I have previously mentioned, the form itself is in most parts prescribed by legislation and little scope exists to make alterations. Advertising and publicity events have taken place but have again proved not to be cost effective.

As I have previously advised that 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 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. Electoral staff will continue with initiatives to get the register as complete and accurate as possible, particularly approaching the Local government elections in May 2017.

Although returns rates for forms are not as high as I would like, thus costing the public purse unnecessary expense, the canvass now continues throughout the year with the key date for electoral registers to be complete and accurate now accepted as being for electoral events.

### **2.1.2 Absent Voters List**

Since my last report the number of postal voters across the 4 constituent councils has changed as follows;-

- East Lothian 17,488 to 17,485
- Edinburgh 83,003 to 83,438
- Midlothian 14,005 to 14,065
- West Lothian 26,299 to 26,423

A number of request for absent vote applications made on ITRs has still to be actioned.

### **2.1.3 Local Government Elections 4<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

Work has commenced in drafting timetables and work plans for the elections in May. Much of the high level tasks now come under the remit of the Electoral management Board for Scotland. Lothian has fed into the various parts of consultations and the convenor has now published her directions.

### **2.1.4 Local Government Boundary Review**

The new local government boundaries are now in force and will take effect for elections from 4<sup>th</sup> May 2017. It is hoped that all Lothian registers will be published on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2016 in the new ward boundaries.

### **2.1.5 Cabinet Office Funding**

As you know EROs throughout the UK receive funding for the additional duties required for Individual Electoral Registration. Lothian has already been awarded the finance for this year but has the option of applying for additional funds, if required, through a justification led bid. We will continue to assess our expenditure requirements and then consider the appropriateness of a bid by the due date mid-January.

I have advised the Cabinet Office that funds for future years e.g. 2017/18 must be made known to EROs by the end of November the previous year at the latest to allow EROs to plan for their budget bids to Boards and Councils as required. I have been assured that we will be given an assurance statement as soon as possible.

### **2.1.6 Absent Vote Refresh**

Please note that there will be a refresh of absent vote signatures in January 2017 for those absent vote signatures that are over 5 years old. This is a requirement and I ask you to advise any electors who are not happy with this refresh that the refresh is a necessity under current legislation.

## **2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities November 2016 – February 2017**

### **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 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 by 14 to 17year olds;
- Carry out the refresh of signatures for absent voters whose signatures are now five years old, and
- Commence preparation work for the 2017 Local Government elections.

## **3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES**

### **3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016 – 18<sup>th</sup> November**

#### **3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings**

As at 19<sup>th</sup> August 2016 there were 408,402 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen slightly to 409,727 as at 18<sup>th</sup> November 2016, an increase of 1,323 dwellings in 3 months. This figure can be compared to the same period in 2015 where 1,365 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 80 dwellings have been altered which compares to 53 altered bands during the same period in 2015.

### **3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales**

During the period, the records of 499 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings compared to 521 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. These figures represent the number of dwellings which would have a band change made if statute did not preclude changing the Valuation List

### **3.1.4 Council Tax – Proposals and Appeals**

The numbers of Council Tax proposals/appeals outstanding continues to stand at reasonable levels. As at 19<sup>th</sup> August 2016 there were 98 cases outstanding. As at 18<sup>th</sup> November 2016 there were 61 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 14<sup>th</sup> December.

In March 2016 the Scottish Government published its proposals for reform of Council Tax. The proposals (to vary the rates collected in bands E-H) have now been approved by Parliament. The Parliament has also lifted the freeze on council tax payment rates to the extent of allowing no more than a 3% increase.

## **3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities November 2016 – February 2017**

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 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016 – 18<sup>th</sup> November**

I shall repeat 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 this financial year.

#### **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 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016 to 18<sup>th</sup> November 2016, there have been 278 additions, 148 valuation alterations and 208 deletions. This can be compared to the previous period in 2016 where there was 346 additions, 229 valuation alterations and 323 deletions.

#### **4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals**

During the period 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016 to 18<sup>th</sup> November, 80 appeals have been resolved. As at 18<sup>th</sup> November the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 489. Courts to deal with the outstanding appeals are scheduled for the rest of November and December and between May and June.

1 decision of the Local Valuation Appeal Panel has been appealed by the Ratepayer and is currently progressing through the process to be heard by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court. The cases involve a Research centre occupied by Edinburgh Pharmaceuticals.

#### **4.1.4 2017 Revaluation**

Work towards publishing the 2017 revaluation roll is reaching the final stages.

The Scottish Government requested that the SAA provide them with draft RVs for all subjects by 30<sup>th</sup> September this year to allow them to carry out modelling for reliefs, poundages etc. All Lothian properties were revalued and uploaded in line with this request.

Progress has been hampered by late notification of proposed decapitalisation rates and finalised legislation. The date the revalued figures will be made available on-line to ratepayers is not yet finalised but hoped to be round 15<sup>th</sup> December 2016.

Legal Opinion regarding a Supreme Court case Woolway (VO) v Mazars LLP (2015) was received and we continue to amend entries in line with that opinion. The number of entries in the Lothian Valuation Roll will rise from approximately 32, 500 entries to 35,500 entries.

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 received Royal Ascent on 22<sup>nd</sup> April this year re-introducing 'Shootings' to the Valuation Roll. I have issued forms to collect information to approximately 780 properties. The analysis and valuation of this category of subject will be carried out on return of relevant data for hopeful completion of Net Annual values by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017.

#### **4.1.5 Scottish Government Consultations and Bills Affecting Non-Domestic Rates**

The Scottish Government has completed a consultation on Transitional Relief '2017 Non-domestic Rating Revaluation – Consultation on Possible Transitional Arrangements' the outcome of the consultation is awaited.

Further to the Scottish Government consultation 'Supporting Business – Promoting Growth' a further review 'Barclay Review of Business Rates in Scotland' is taking place and is due to report to Ministers in July 2017.

#### **4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities November 2016 – February 2017**

The service priorities in Non-Domestic Rating are:-

- 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 remaining subjects to be created as a result of a recent Supreme Court Opinion;
- 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.

### **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 legislative, management and staff requirements. The Control of Smoking at Work policy has been reviewed to incorporate vaping devices and has been agreed with Unison.

Unison had expressed their concern at the current levels of staffing and the workload required to carry out our statutory duties. As you are aware I am fully in agreement with the concerns raised and have now undertaken a minor review of my technical department. This review has resulted in a reviewed structure and creation of a new post. This new post has

been introduced to carry out tasks graded at lower pay grades thus alleviating the workload of professional and technical staff to carry out tasks more commensurate with their grading.

I have reached agreement with Unison on creation of a new job description and person specification and minor alterations to some existing job descriptions and person specifications. I have also agreed an amended career progression scheme for both Trainee Valuers and Surveying Technicians.

Job descriptions and person specifications affected include the following;-

Property Assistant – new

Trainee Technician – amended from existing Technician/Trainee Technician.

Technician – amended from existing Technician/Trainee Technician

Trainee Valuer – amended from existing Valuer/Trainee Valuer

Valuer – amended from existing Valuer/Trainee Valuer

Divisional Valuer – minor amendment

Schemes affected include;-

Career Development Salary Progression Scheme for Trainee Valuers

Career Development Salary Progression Scheme for Surveying Technicians

I have further agreed with Unison that I will commence a minor review of the administration sections with a view to attaining a similar outcome to the technical department. The intention is again to create permanent posts that will carry out lower grade tasks leaving the existing staff with tasks more commensurate with their pay grades. We also agree that a proper career structure should be in place for the administration sections.

## **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.

I have extended the contracts for the 3 Referencers recruited on temporary contracts to the end of December 2016 assisting with Revaluation 2017 tasks. The contracts for the referencers will not be extended beyond December 2016.

I have recruited an IT developer to replace the post vacated in my last report. The IT team will not fill the previous Developer vacancy reported.

I have received and accepted a resignation from a Divisional Valuer and a retirement of another Divisional Valuer. Both posts have been advertised and will be filled at the start of January 2017.

By the start of January I will have a total of 3 vacant Valuer posts, two Technician posts and finance for 3 temporary Referencers. Those posts have formed part of my restructure together with reduced hours accumulated under the flexible working scheme. I have

utilised this available finance and advertised for 1 Valuer, 2 Trainee Valuers, 1 Trainee Technician and 6 Property Assistants. I hope to complete interviews during December and have the posts filled during January/February.

The budget for the posts have been discussed with the Treasurer and I am advised I can complete this review within budget.

## **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 continue to develop and improve systems for the current revaluation work to ensure all checks are in place and that the appropriate uploads can be made at the required times.

At the moment a number of external data files are received by LVJB to assist in the Electoral Registration process. It enables targeted engagement for student registration, identification of new potential electors and classification of empty properties. Unfortunately the data often does not adhere to a standard schema and requires labour intensive manipulation and input into back office systems.

We are now in the process of analysing our current data handling and operational procedures to identify where we can programmatically handle this data into desired formats and automatically load it into our systems for processing. We are also looking to extend some of this functionality into our existing cloud based canvass data to advance our export and import techniques to further improve process efficiency.

## **7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

## **8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

I would ask you to approve the minor amendment to 'The Control of Smoking at Work Policy'.

I would ask you to note the the altered Career Development Salary Progression Schemes, Job Descriptions and Person Specifications.

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**

**28 November 2016**