

**ASSESSOR'S SEPTEMBER 2017
PROGRESS REPORT
TO THE LOTHIAN VALUATION JOINT BOARD**



18th September 2017

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To advise and update members as to the service overview and priorities, current issues and the future direction of the Board.

2.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION SERVICE OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

2.1 Electoral Registration – Service Overview 1st April 2017 to 31st August 2017

2.1.1 Absent Voters List

The Absent Votes List indicates those electors who for whatever reason cannot or prefer not to attend their Polling Station on the day of an election. Such electors can opt to place themselves on the absent voters list and receive a postal ballot pack issued by Returning Officers. Electors can indicate whether they wish to have a permanent absent vote until they notify the ERO to the contrary, an absent vote for a particular election or referendum, or an absent vote for a defined period of time.

The Absent Voters List represents those electors with an indefinite or permanent absent vote.

Current total numbers for each constituent authority are;

East Lothian	16,547
Edinburgh	77,098
Midlothian	13,323
West Lothian	25,004

The number added during the period 1st April/31st August 2017 was 4,818 and the number added since publication of the current Electoral Register on 1st December 2016 is 5,402.

2.1.2 Rolling Registration

Throughout the year the electoral register is updated on a monthly basis. This is referred to as rolling registration. During the period 1st April to 31st August a total of 42,410 additions were made, 29,842 removals and 1,070 amendments. This period reflects the activity associated with both the Scottish Local Government and Westminster Parliamentary elections.

2.1.3 Local Government Election 4th May 2017/Westminster Parliamentary 8th June 2017

As these elections ran so close to each other this report provides information that spans both events.

The level of interest in respect of registration for both occasions was considerable. This created high levels of recourse to the office by way of telephone, email, on-line activity and paper application.

The on-line registration application facility provides the public with an excellent and immediate facility however, when high volumes of applications are experienced within a constrained election timetable, considerable pressure is placed on resources. In the days leading up to the last date for registration for both these elections, thousands of registrations applications were received, with 6,315 on the closing day for applications for the General Election.

Absent vote application numbers traditionally increase around election time, and significant numbers were received over this period. The timetable surrounding the printing and posting of postal ballot packs is controlled by Returning Officers and every effort is made for all applications and personal identifiers to be processed by the due dates. On the last date for receipt of absent vote applications all outstanding applications required to be processed and sent to nominated printers later on that same day.

For the Local Government election between the period from register publication on 1st December 2016 until the final electoral notice of alteration on the 26th April 2017 24,672 electors holding the required franchise, were added to the register. The total eligible electorate for this election was 659,717.

In respect of the Westminster Parliamentary election during the period 1st December to final electoral notice of alteration on the 1st June 2017 27,344 eligible electors were added giving a total eligible electorate for this election of 632,027.

Covering both elections the following volumes were experienced; 17,982 telephone calls were received, 15,419 emails answered, and the total number of absent vote applications processed were 31,217.

As at previous elections we provided an election day service to polling place staff who were able to make direct contact with any queries they may have. This service has been praised by Returning Officers.

The Electoral Commission has recently published its report into the General Election and of particular interest are the findings in respect of the use of the on-line electoral registration system where it records that around 96% of all applications came via this route. In addition however the report indicates that there was a high level of duplicate registrations received ranging from 30% to 70% across the country. The Commission indicates that work is required to reduce this duplicate level as it is acknowledged that it adds considerably to the work of Registration Officers at the time of elections. See the full report (24 pages) at:

https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/232761/Electoral-registration-report-July-2017.pdf

2.1.4 2017 Household Canvass

The 2017 Household Canvass commenced in early August with a staggered issue of 409,380 Household Enquiry Forms over a one week period.

The canvass allows us to check that the details we hold for electors is correct and provides an opportunity for electors to notify us of any changes either in terms of who is living at the address or whether any changes are required to a current electors' details.

Any new electors are encouraged to go on-line as part of the canvass process or can be provided with a paper Invitation to Register (ITR) form.

At this stage in the canvass process the return rate currently stands at 51%. The first reminder issue of forms took place during the first week in September and involved 200,220 forms.

Final canvass return rates, as reported to the Board, for previous years are 2016 70%, 2015 72%, 2014 84% (pre-IER). As no elections are currently forecast until 2021, which have in recent years been the main driver to maintain and increase elector numbers, a challenge is now faced to engage with the electorate to secure a higher level of return to the annual canvass.

The door to door canvass team have commenced their activities chasing non-returned forms. Tablet technology is used in order to avoid further production of forms and allows a live time update of the canvass data base. The canvass team always leave material promoting registration at every door that receives a call. Door to door canvass is a legislative requirement of IER.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities September 2017 to December 2017

The service priorities over the next 3 months are -

- Conclude the household canvass, processing all forms received
- Publish the revised Electoral Register on 1st December 2017

- Continue to process all applications received such as registration, absent vote, opt out, and change of name applications
- Continue with doorstep canvass, chasing outstanding HEF and ITR forms
- Continue with engagement activities

3 COUNCIL TAX SERVICE OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 1st April 2017 to 31st August 2017

3.1.1 New Dwellings

As at 1st April 2017 there were 411,215 chargeable dwellings on the Council Tax List for Lothian. This has risen to 413,144 by 31st August 2017, an increase of 1,929 dwellings. This can be compared to the same period in 2016 and 2015 where 1,390 and 1,250 dwellings were added.

The time taken, as set against the effective date, to add dwellings to the List is a key performance indicator.

For this five month period the current performance is noted below -

0 to 3 months	3 to 6 months	More than 6 months
95.36	3.46	1.18

This compares with the overall 2016/2017 performance level previously reported and noted below -

0 to 3 months	3 to 6 months	More than 6 months
93.86	4.25	1.89

3.1.2 Council Tax – Altered Bands

During the relevant period as a result of alterations carried out prior to the date of sale and band re-appraisals being carried out as a consequence, the bandings of 107 dwellings have been altered. This compares to 78 in the same period during 2016, and 90 during 2015.

During this period a significant band re-appraisal exercise was carried out in the Drumbrae area of Edinburgh. In terms of Council Tax legislation the Assessor is able to review bandings where there is satisfaction that an incorrect band has been originally applied. In this particular case it was brought to our attention that similar if not identical houses situated at the same location were in different bands. This gave rise to an extensive investigation and re-appraisal of the sales evidence used during the original banding exercise. The outcome was that the bandings of 307 houses were increased.

Considerable effort was taken to alert ratepayers to the action that was going to be taken and provide a full explanation. In addition elected members associated with the area were provided with a briefing pack. To date three appeals have been received.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no Sales

During the relevant period, the records of 1,059 dwellings have been updated following receipt of building warrant applications. This compares with 818 in 2016 and 1,114 in 2015. The maintenance of domestic property data ensures a prompt response to point of sale re-banding requirements and ensures we are properly positioned should significant changes to Council Tax be introduced.

3.1.4 Council Tax – Proposals and Appeals

As at 1st April 2017 there were 100 Council Tax appeals outstanding. As at 31st August this figure is 85. This compares with 98 at the same time during 2016. Council Tax hearings before the Valuation Appeal Committee are scheduled at periods throughout the year in order to facilitate disposal of appeals. During the relevant period 27 Council Tax appeals have been cited for hearing, with 10 of those going forward to be heard by the Valuation Appeal Committee. No bands have been reduced for 8 of the cases and the decisions are awaited for the remaining 2.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities September 2017 to December 2017

The main service priorities in Council Tax are -

- Amend the Council Tax List to reflect inserts and deletions
- Carry out point of sale appraisals amending bands as necessary
- Maintaining the domestic property data base
- Council Tax appeal disposal

4.0 NON-DOMESTIC SERVICE RATING OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

4.1 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Overview 1st April 2017 to 31st August 2017

4.1.1 2005 and 2010 Revaluation Appeals

In common with other Assessor areas there remain a small number of appeals lodged at the Lands Tribunal. These are appeals which have been referred from the Valuation Appeal Committee, primarily on the grounds of complexity. The majority relate to Telecommunication subjects. It is anticipated these shall be resolved shortly without need for recourse to a hearing before the Tribunal.

4.1.2 2010 Running Roll Appeals

These are appeals which have been lodged following alteration to the Valuation Roll reflecting the period 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017 and also on the more restricted grounds of a claimed material change of circumstances. 937 appeals have been lodged and require to be disposed of by 30th December 2018. Hearings of the Valuation Appeal Committee have been scheduled between May and December 2017 and 702 appeals have been cited so far. 418 appeals have already been disposed of.

4.1.3 2017 Revaluation

The 2017 Revaluation was delivered as per timetable with Revaluation Notices being issued to all parties with an interest during March 2017. Draft values had been available for viewing since December 2016 on the Scottish Assessors Association website, www.saa.gov.uk.

To date 7,564 appeals have been received. The last date for lodging appeals is 30th September 2017 at which time it is anticipated that around 9,000 appeals shall have been lodged.

A diet of Valuation Appeal Committee hearings has been scheduled for February/March 2018 and these shall be the first in respect of the 2017 Revaluation. Citations for these hearings shall be issued in October reflecting the minimum legal citation period of 105 days.

4.1.4 2017 Running Roll

Throughout the year, subject to the competing priorities of other workloads, staff undertake Running Roll duties in respect of the Valuation Roll. This involves the survey and valuation of newly constructed, altered, or demolished non-domestic property. During 1st April to 31st August 1,673 amendments have been made to the Roll. This compares with 898 in 2016, and 1,607 in 2015.

The length of time it takes to make amendments, relative to the effective date of change, to the Valuation Roll is a key performance indicator. Noted below is the performance achieved over the April to August period -

0 to 3 months	3 to 6 months	More than 6 months
85.12	14.88	0.00

This compares with the overall position achieved for 2016/17 noted below -

0 to 3 months	3 to 6 months	More than 6 months
47.15	21.05	31.79

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities September to December 2017

The main service priorities for Non-domestic Rating are -

- Continue with Running Roll activities
- Dispose of all outstanding 2010 Running Roll appeals
- Complete the administrative processing of all 2017 Revaluation appeals received within the deadline date
- Commence the citation process for the first 2017 Revaluation appeals
- Continue to dispose of 2017 Revaluation appeals out with the citation period
- Make entries in the Valuation Roll for “shooting rights” as required by legislation
- Continue with the process of rental and other information gathering and analysis

5.0 THE BARCLAY REVIEW OF NON DOMESTIC RATES IN SCOTLAND

The Barclay Review published its findings and recommendations on Tuesday 22nd August 2017. A response from the Scottish Government in terms of recommendations to be taken forward is awaited.

The remit given to the Barclay Review was to make recommendations that enhanced and reformed business rates in such a way that supported business growth and long term investment, reflecting the changing market place while at the same time presenting a revenue neutral outcome.

Taking this remit further the Barclay Review adopted the following broad principles -

- To make the rates system as fair as possible and to remove what can be perceived as anomalies
- To endeavour to ensure that shocks to the system are minimised and help ratepayers plan for the future
- To seek to ensure that the rates system is as transparent as possible and that there is a better understanding of how the rates system operates
- To seek to ensure that the administrative systems and processes surrounding the rates system are as simple and straightforward as possible
- To promote greater accountability on all involved in the rates system

The Review contained 30 recommendations of which the following are of particular interest to Assessor organisations -

- Independent Assessors are retained
- Commencing in 2022 a system of 3 yearly Revaluations shall be introduced
- New property, extended or improved property shall not face rates increase for 1 year following completion of these works
- Improved information gathering powers for Assessors with the use of civil penalties

- A review of the appeals system to be carried out and the appeals system to be moved to the Tribunal Scotland framework by 2022
- A review of Plant and Machinery valuation to be carried out
- All land and heritages to be entered into the Valuation Roll and relief applied where appropriate
- Assessors should provide more transparency, higher levels of engagement and consistency of approach

While these recommendation represent a challenge for Assessors they are broadly welcomed and subject to confirmation by Scottish Government, discussion and planning on how to take these proposals forward shall commence shortly within the Scottish Assessors Association and by individual Assessors.

6.0 TRANSFORMATION AND CULTURAL CHANGE PROGRAMME

Progress continues to be made in respect of the Programme activities. The Project Board continues to drive the detailed investigation into processes and procedures in accordance with the timetable. A number of recommendations for improvement and increased efficiency have already been enacted.

The recently announced recommendations from the Barclay Review assist the Transformation Programme by providing an additional point of focus for reviewing and redesigning the current organisational business model.

At the end of August the Board's early release provisions were made available and all staff were invited to give this matter consideration. The closing date for notes of interest is the 29th September and to date 22 have been received. These shall be considered by the Assessor with an indication of the level of support each application can expect being notified to individual staff members by the end of October 2017.

In accordance with the Board's early release policy the Assessor shall provide a business case analysis to the Treasurer and Convenor for consideration and approval. A further report shall be given to the Board.

The Trade Union continues to be kept abreast of developments and consultation between the parties is ongoing.

7.0 HUMAN RESOURCES

The Equalities Mainstreaming Report for 2017 that outlined conclusions and activities in respect of previously declared equalities outcomes has been submitted to the Equalities Commission and a copy is available on the Board's web site at www.lothian-vjb.gvo.uk.

Work has commenced by way of an information audit in respect of the new General Data Protection Regulations that are due to come into force in May 2018.

A general review and updating of HR policies is ongoing.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Board is asked to note the content of this report.

Graeme Strachan
Interim Assessor & ERO