



ASSESSOR'S PROGRESS REPORT TO LOTHIAN VALUATION JOINT BOARD

16th April 2018

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides information on recent and proposed activities, progress and performance, within the Assessors organisation.

2.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

2.1 2017 Canvass Outcome

The 2017 Household Canvass concluded on the 1st December 2017 with the publication of the new electoral register. A return rate for Household Enquiry Forms of 74% was achieved, which compares favourably with previous years; 2016 70%, 2015 72%.

Returns of HEF's by electronic means, telephone, internet and text, increased from 106,361 in 2016 to 118,256 in 2017.

During the canvass period 36,819 Invitation to Register forms were issued in addition to 15,669 postal vote application forms. At the point of register publication the total electorate stood at 656,837, an increase from the same time in 2016 of 5,268, while the standing list for absent voters increased from 123,430 to 127,725.

As part of the ongoing requirement to chase non-returned forms the canvass team was active during this period and made calls to 86,374 households.

As part of preparations for the 2018 Household canvass consideration is being given to conducting an e-canvass pilot of 139,000 households in advance of the main postal issue. This initial step shall allow individuals to provide a return on-line and will lead to a financial saving on postage and printing.

The future nature of the annual canvass remains under consideration by the Cabinet Office with the outcome of various pilot exercises currently under evaluation. If any changes are proposed these are likely to have impact from 2019 onwards.

2.2 2018 AVPI Refresh

The annual requirement to review and refresh signatures as part of the absent vote process in cases where it was 5 years since last provision, was undertaken in January. In total 8,208 invitations to refresh were issued, 6,777 were returned and processed, and 1,431 absent votes were ultimately removed from the standing list.

2.3 Engagement Activities

Throughout the year we have made contact and supplied information, leaflets and registration forms to a range of organisations, such as CRISIS, Edinburgh Throughcare & Aftercare, Muirhouse & Port of Leith Housing Associations, Polish Vote You Are At Home campaign, information material was made available in student residences and at ESPC offices, the household canvass was promoted via constituent councils Facebook and Twitter accounts, advertising was carried out in the Mascot magazine and Service Guide. In addition staff attended 25 Citizenship Ceremonies and visited Care Homes throughout Lothian.

Also over the canvass period key engagement was undertaken with young persons. Visits were made to 22 schools within Lothian to encourage registration. As a result 881 young person registrations were achieved.

2.4 Appointment of an Engagement Officer

As part of the Transformation Programme an Engagement Officer position has been identified. It is intended that through this post engagement activities shall become more focused and targeted, allowing effective evaluation, and, as part of an overarching strategy, encompass all aspects of the organisation's engagement responsibility.

2.5 Midlothian By-election Ward 1 Penicuik

A by-election in Midlothian Ward 1 Penicuik was held on the 22nd March 2018. By the due dates we had processed 130 applications to register and 56 absent vote applications. The turnout on election-day was 42.9%. In addition, in advance of the last date for registration, staff took our information stand to Penicuik Centre to create awareness of the by-election and the registration process. 110 members of the public visited the stand and a range of enquiries and checks were dealt with.

2.6 E – Provision of Registers and Register Updates

Electoral legislation allows the provision of relevant register and other data to elected members in a variety of formats, the most common being in print form and as an electronic file provided as an email attachment.

Elected members are entitled to register data extracts following the publication of the new register in December, monthly to reflect new additions to the register, and at elections.

The total number of applications requesting data can vary but there is the potential for 171 requests to be received once Local Government, Scottish Government and UK Parliamentary members are taken into account. This does not include requests for entire Registers from authorised political parties during election and referendum events.

The provision of this information is a time and resource hungry activity and ensuring access to the information is provided to all parties within a short period, for example at elections, can be onerous.

A facility now exists that shall provide automatic notification via email to members when registration data is available, and, if requested, shall then issue and record that information has been sent. The data shall be in electronic format. The Board is requested to give this option their consideration.

2.7 Scottish Government Consultation on Electoral Reform

During December 2017 the Scottish Government issued its consultation paper on Electoral Reform. This covered a range of issues from extending the registration franchise, to electronic voting in polling stations, remote voting, the running and timing of elections, and the order of candidates' names on ballot papers amongst the main items for consideration.

This was very much an opinion finding exercise with the intention being to review comments received before presenting more definitive proposals for further consultation.

3.0 COUNCIL TAX

3.1 New Builds

Activity with new builds and inserts onto the Council Tax List continued throughout 2017/18 as indicated below. In terms of inserts per Council area the figures are Edinburgh 3,570, West Lothian, 666, Midlothian 671, and East Lothian 808.

Valuation List	New homes added	Point of Sale Band Changes
2012/13	3,171	172
2013/14	4,315	203
2014/15	4,409	257
2015/16	4,688	270
2016/17	4,826	254
2017/18	5,715	281

A significant number of housing development sites are under active construction with others at consent stage. Some of these where the expected number of new houses is in excess of 200 are Heritage Grange (in excess of 500), South Gilmerton Brae, Broomview, Kingfisher Park, Shrubhill Walk, Lady Victoria Grange, Harvieston Park, Shawfair (in excess of 4,000), Heartlands, Winchburgh Village & South Queensferry, Letham Mains, Fenton Gait, Newtonlees/Fairacres, St.Clements Wells, Almond Park.

3.2 “Martin Lewis” TV Programme

A recent TV programme formatted around the “money saving” platform and fronted by Martin Lewis gave rise to hundreds of enquiries from Council Tax payers seeking to have the bands on their properties reviewed and reduced. This is the second time that Council Tax has featured on this programme where an impression is given that many Council Tax bands are wrong and council tax payers should make enquiries. On the first occasion this item was aired we received thousands of enquiries.

A person must lodge an appeal within six months of becoming the council tax payer for a property appearing in the Council Tax List. Outwith that period appeals lodged are regarded as “out of time” and proceed to be heard on competency grounds only.

Following receipt of these recent enquiries ratepayers shall be provided with information on the band applied to their property, and of their legal rights of appeal.

3.3 Use of Tablet Devices in the Field

The validity of using tablet devices in the field to collect and process information in an efficient and effective fashion has been established through the electoral registration process. As part of the Transformation Programme this technology is to be extended to Council Tax activities and I expect a field trial to take place during the summer.

4.0 VALUATION ROLL

4.1 2017 Revaluation Appeal Progress

Disposal of appeals lodged following the 2017 Revaluation commenced in February 2018. Between the 7 February and 16 March six Valuation Appeal Committee hearing dates were scheduled to deal with Revaluation appeals with another 3 hearing dates allocated to outstanding 2010 appeals. Over this period 1,695 revaluation appeals have been dealt with. A further programme of twenty three Valuation Appeal Committee hearings is now in place starting on the 3 May and ending on the 14 December 2018. At this stage 11,312 revaluation appeals remain outstanding.

While legislation allows a three year period in which all revaluation appeals are required to be dealt with it is important and in the interests of the ratepayer that disposal of appeals is completed as quickly as possible.

To that end investigations are underway in respect of the 493 appeals, 4% of the outstanding total, that have been lodged by ratepayers, approximately 250 being sole traders, without professional representation, in order to effect early resolution. In addition we are encouraging engagement with professional agents who have large portfolios for a single ratepayer to enter into appeal discussions outwith the formal citation process. This may succeed to dispose of volumes of appeals quickly while allowing time to focus on more problematic subjects.

4.2 Commercial Rental Enquiry (CRE) Form Issue

Preparations are underway for the issue of circa 11,000 Commercial Rental Enquiry forms to proprietors, tenants and occupiers of subjects currently appearing in the Valuation Roll. This activity forms the bedrock of essential information required to support the valuation levels adopted by Assessors both in preparation for a revaluation, assisting with appeal disposal, and during the quinquennium to inform on market trends and movements. It is intended to move this activity onto a rolling programme thereby allowing the more efficient processing of returned information. While forms can be returned using the provided reply-paid envelopes, ratepayers are encouraged to go on-line to the SAA Portal where a facility exists to supply information electronically. In addition ratepayers are directed to the LVJB website where they shall find more information on the form and why it is being issued and the importance of replying.

With the move to 3 yearly revaluations it is vital that a high level of response to forms of this nature is achieved and the engagement process at this stage is seen as an introduction to a higher level of interaction with ratepayers.

4.3 Engagement

The Barclay Review of NDR, as adopted by Scottish Government, made a number of recommendations in respect of engagement by Assessors with ratepayers and their representatives.

In pursuit of this requirement The Scottish Assessors Association has, with the support of Scottish Government and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, created two engagement forums, the Scottish Ratepayers Forum and the Scottish Rating Agents Forum. Each has a different target audience, one being ratepayers and industry bodies, the other professional rating agents involved with appeal disposal. It is intended that these groups meet periodically throughout the year.

Within Lothian VJB, engagement has taken place with professional rating agents in advance of commencing the appeal disposal programme with a follow up meeting scheduled for May 2018. The initial meeting allowed for a reflection on pre-revaluation arrangements, the exchange of views on procedural aspects of the citation and appeal process, and discussions on aspects of professional negotiation.

5.0 CORPORATE PLANNING

5.1 Corporate Activities 2018/19

Development of the 2018/19 Corporate Plan has proceeded during January to March with a number of key objectives identified. These, some of which are noted below, are activities aimed at supporting and augmenting the existing functional and service deliverables;

- Creation of a Barclay Implementation Plan/3 yearly revaluations
- Development of an Engagement Strategy encompassing all stakeholder services
- A review of the existing LVJB website
- Formation and commencement of the Governance Group including an extension to current audit activity
- Creation and deployment of an overarching Performance Framework
- Improved performance of key functional and service deliverables
- Creation of a LVJB Training & Staff Development Strategy

These objectives shall be adopted under the remit of the Project Management Board thereby allowing formal scrutiny of planning, delivery and implementation.

6.0 TRANSFORMATION AND CULTURAL CHANGE PROGRAMME

6.1 Implementation Update

Following Board approval in February 2018, implementation of the revised staffing structure has proceeded on timetable with only one remaining post currently within the recruitment process. It is encouraging to note that staff at all levels showed considerable interest in the recruitment process.

In terms of the ongoing change process identified under the TCCP a number of proposals are currently under Project Board control with a range of delivery dates earmarked throughout the year. Some of the principle projects are noted below;

- Further deployment of in-field tablet devices
- Work item prioritisation
- Improvement to workload distribution
- Further refinement to key internal processes
- Increased integration of primary data sets
- Improvements to incoming document handling procedures
- Improved response times to stakeholder email enquiries

7.0 GOVERNANCE & AUDIT

7.1 Governance, Best Value and Risk Group

At its meeting of the 21st August 2017 the Board agreed to the creation of a Governance, Best Value and Risk Group within the Assessor's organisation. While preparatory work in terms of remit, constitution and procedural operation are nearing conclusion the inaugural meeting of the group is scheduled for 21st May 2018. Following discussion, City of Edinburgh Audit Team recommended that the Governance Group provide an external interface.

It remains the position that given the size and nature of the Assessor and ERO organisation a formal Audit Committee, formed from the Boards membership, is unnecessary. However it is proposed that the Governance Group shall hold twice yearly meetings that incorporate Board member and other interested stakeholder involvement, for example external Audit and Treasury personnel. The detail of this proposal is under consideration and further information shall be provided to the Board in due course.

7.2 Preparation for GDPR

In May 2018 the new General Data Protection Regulations shall be adopted within the organisation. These regulations replace the existing eight principles of Data Protection which currently govern the use of personal data.

In broad terms the GDPR can be summarised as the following;

- Data processing must be fair, lawful and transparent
- It must be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes
- It should be adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary
- It must be kept accurate and current
- It must not be retained longer than is necessary
- It must always be kept secure

The above principles are subject to accountability. Organisations must be able not only to ensure compliance, but be able to demonstrate it as well.

Work in preparation of the new regulations has been undertaken with the following key elements either in place or identified as a requirement under action;

- Information asset register
- Privacy Notices
- Data Sharing Agreements and contract review
- Security Awareness Training and Security Breach Protocols
- Subject Access Request Framework
- Incorporation of Privacy by Design methodologies to support business change
- Data minimisation and cleansing procedures

Recent City of Edinburgh Council Audit Team activity has reviewed our preparations for GDPR in addition to other aspects of Governance and provided recommendations for further action as appropriate.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 The Board is asked to note the content of this report.
- 8.2 The Board is asked to approve a trial, by Board members, of an automated delivery system of legally entitled electoral register data.
- 8.3 The Board is asked to approve the adoption of twice yearly meetings of the Governance, Best Value and Risk Group where Board member and other external stakeholder representation are requested.

**Graeme Strachan
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