

ASSESSOR'S QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE JOINT BOARD

25 November 2013

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 19th August – 11th November 2013

2.1.1 Absent Voters List

As at 1 August 2013 the number of postal voters on the list was 108,679.

In compliance with the Representation of the People, The Elections (Refresh of Signatures for Absent Voters) Regulations 2013 we issued 58,997 requests for fresh signatures on 1st August 2013. The final return rate was 88%. 7,015 absent voters who had failed to return a fresh signature by 12th September were sent notification that their absent vote had been cancelled and their names removed from the absent voters list.

As a result of the cancellation letters and canvass activity so far, 25,735 postal vote application forms have been issued.

At 1st November the number of postal voters on the list was 100,810.

2.1.2 Rolling Registration

Since my last report, during the rolling registration update periods for August through to November, my staff processed a total of 7,577 additions to the register, 9,072 removals and 480 amendments. There has therefore been a slight decrease in the number of electors on the Register.

2.1.3 Transition to Individual Electoral Registration

As I have previously mentioned the transition to individual registration effectively commences this year. During September, in line with the rest of the UK, we carried out a confirmation dry run to allow the Cabinet Office and me to estimate the likely match rate that we may expect when IER is formally introduced in autumn 2014.

The Cabinet Office have since issued letters to all Electoral Registration Officers advising the total funding that will be given for the financial year 2014/15 to enable the transition to take place effectively. As required, to enable full funding, a guarantee has been signed by the Treasurer to LVJB and myself as ERO.

Graeme Strachan has commenced staff training with information sessions given to all staff working in registration and support activities.

Lothian Valuation Joint Board is well represented by senior staff on the various groups and committees that have been formed to ensure legislation, IT capabilities, training and delivery are fit for purpose.

2.1.4 2013 Canvass

The 2013 canvass commenced with the delivery of forms by Royal Mail from 9th October. As you will have seen from the communication you received a young person's registration form was included with the main canvass form. Contrary to expectations the return rate at the first reminder stage was 3.25% lower than at the same point in 2012.

Because this year's canvass is very important for the transition to IER and also in preparation for both the European Election and the Scottish Independence Referendum we carried out TV advertising, featured on Forth radio news and had media articles in the Scotsman and Evening News. The fact that this increased public awareness campaign has not had a positive affect on return rates is very disappointing.

Reminder canvass forms were delivered to matched households by Royal Mail from 22nd November. 176 canvassers have been employed to visit approximately 75,000 unmatched households.

2.1.5 Scottish Independence Referendum

Each household received both a household form and a young person's voter registration form in mid-October. We were able to pre-populate the data of 6,779 young persons. The return rate of the forms is disappointing with a lower percentage return than the main canvass form.

The Scottish Government has now provided the amount of additional expenditure that will be covered by way of grant for 2013/14 and also for April 2014 to the referendum period.

The YP forms being enclosed with the annual canvass form would appear to have caused some confusion with the Lothian electorate with the result that many mistakes in relation to form completion have been made and a great number of blank forms returned unnecessarily. The additional time required to sort mail necessitated some overtime to allow mailroom staff to deal with the increased workload.

2.2 Electoral Registration – Service Priorities November 2013 – February 2014

2.2.1 The service priorities over the next 3 months

- Carry out reminder postal and personal door to door canvass of all Lothian households;
- Process all returned canvass and YP forms;
- Apply all EU citizen European Parliamentary Election application forms;
- Apply absent voting requests as received;
- Update the electoral register to include new electors, amend registration data and delete as required;
- Prepare for final reminder issue due in February;
- Continue with initiatives to encourage participation and improve registration rates.

3.0 COUNCIL TAX OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

3.1 Council Tax – Service Overview 19th August – 25th November 2013

3.1.1 Council Tax – New Dwellings

As at 19th August 2013 there were 396,895 chargeable dwellings in Lothian which has risen very slightly to 397,856 as at 11th November 2013, an increase of 961 dwellings over 3 months.

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 48 dwellings have been altered. The number of band changes remains at a very low level.

3.1.3 Council Tax – Altered Houses with no sales

During the period, the records of 620 dwellings have been updated, as a result of alteration work being carried out to existing dwellings. 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 Council Tax 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 19th August there were 110 cases outstanding. As at 11th November 2013 there were 106 cases outstanding and Valuation Appeal Committee citations for these appeals will be issued from the start of December. 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.

3.2 Council Tax – Service Priorities November 2013 – February 2014

The main service priorities in Council Tax are as normal:-

- Continue improvement on the time taken between completion of new dwellings and the insertion of the dwelling in the Council Tax List in accordance with performance targets;
- Continue improvement on the time taken between the sale of houses which have been altered and the date their Council Tax Band is changed;
- Update my records by carrying out the survey of Council Tax subjects which have been altered and not sold;
- Continue to resolve proposals and appeals against Council Tax banding;
- Continue with the transfer of house data from paper to electronic format and review performance achieved.

4.0 NON DOMESTIC RATING OVERVIEW AND PRIORITIES

4.1 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Overview 19th August – 25th November 2013

4.1.1 2010 Revaluation Appeals

A total of 10,927 appeals were received against the 2010 Revaluation Roll as published. The number of subjects appealed was 10,386. A total of 10,658 appeals have been resolved to date with 292 of those appeals being dealt with during the period 19th August to 11th November 2013. A diary of courts continues to ensure the appeals are all disposed of by the 31st December 2013, the last date permitted by statute.

I am delighted with the progress made and all appeals should be cleared as required.

4.1.2 Running Roll

My professional and technical staff have continued to survey and value subjects that have been newly constructed, altered or demolished. From 19th August to 11th November 2013, there have been 293 additions, 521 valuation alterations and 213 deletions.

4.1.3 Running Roll Appeals

As at 19th August the number of outstanding running roll appeals stood at 1,253; the number of appeals outstanding as at 11th November was 528. Courts to deal with this type of appeal are scheduled to continue to the end of the calendar year and in the first quarter of 2014. The vast majority of appeals are required to be cleared, within the same statutory framework as the Revaluation appeals, by 31st December 2013. I am delighted with the significant number of appeals cleared and with the progress made in the scheduling of appeal disposal.

4.1.4 Lands Tribunal and Lands Valuation Appeal Courts

Subjects awaiting hearing by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland include, Edinburgh Airport, Clinics & Health Centres, Tennis Centres, Ikea, Distribution Centre, Large Industrial unit, Exclusive Use Venues and Telecommunication sites. Hearings are expected to commence in early 2014.

There is one subject within Lothian currently progressing to the Lands Valuation Appeal Court. The appeal against the Committee decision will probably be heard in Spring 2014.

4.2 Non-Domestic Rating – Service Priorities November 2013 – February 2014

The service priorities in Non-Domestic Rating are:-

- Prepare cases as may be required by the Valuation Appeal Committee;
- Prepare cases as may be required by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland;
- 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;
- Continue to update databases with rent, cost, turnover and throughput information to ensure analysis is as complete and accurate as possible.

5.0 HUMAN RESOURCES

5.1 UNISON

Regular JCC meetings continue to be held.

Policies are timetabled for review to ensure that all policies meet current legal, management and staff requirements.

We have agreed the terms of reference for a minor review of job descriptions for a small number of staff.

5.2 Staffing

I am pleased to report that 2 administration assistants commenced employment in October in time for the start of the canvass. They will be trained in all aspects of registration and will be a welcome addition to the Administration team for the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration.

179 temporary canvassers have been employed to carry out door to door canvassing from November to January.

My IT Support Manager tendered his resignation and the post is being advertised. It is hoped that a suitable replacement can be sourced quickly.

5.3 Equalities

I have no equalities issue at present. I continue to work towards reaching appropriate equalities reporting targets.

Questionnaires to capture personnel information to allow appropriate reporting are in final draft and should be distributed to staff shortly.

6.0 RISK MANAGEMENT

6.1 Risk Registers

The risk register continues to be updated at each management 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. Further job specific risk registers continue to be developed to meet audit recommendations.

6.2 Information Technology

My IT team have been heavily involved in hardware, software and premises security measures required by the Cabinet Office for the introduction of individual electoral registration.

I am at the final stages of renewal of all desktop computers and an upgrade to Microsoft 7 and Office 2013.

7.0 BUILDING ISSUES

7.1 Request to Discharge Deeds

I had been requested by City of Edinburgh Council to sign a discharge of deeds for the ground adjacent to my property. I am pleased to say that negotiations have been concluded and legal documents signed.

Building work has commenced on the site adjacent to my office. I have been given the contact details of the site agent who has been very approachable and willing to resolve any matters immediately.

8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications within this report.

9.0 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

25th November 2013