



Grampian Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer

Public performance report for 2018/19

Introduction

The Grampian Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is an independent statutory official appointed by the Grampian Valuation Joint Board to value non-domestic properties for rating purposes, allocate dwellings to council tax bands and provide an electoral registration service for the Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray Council areas.

General Information

The Grampian Valuation Joint Board is a public body that funds the Assessor & ERO by means of requisitions from Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray councils. Net expenditure for 2018/19 was £4.088M against a budget of £4.292M that was net of additional grant funding of £0.160M provided under the UK government's Electoral Registration Transformation Programme for the introduction of individual electoral registration (IER). The Assessor & ERO has a full-time equivalent of 75 posts distributed between offices in Aberdeen, Banff and Elgin. As at 31 March 2019 there were 71 full-time equivalent staff in post. In the last year staff absence due to ill health was 2.5%. This compares to 1.7% for 2017/18, 1.3% for 2016/17 and 3.9% for 2015/16.

A review of our 2018/19 priorities

The following operational priorities were specifically identified in the management commentary for the year, they must however not be considered in isolation and the organisation has a wide range of on-going priorities that relate not only to operational aspects of the organisation but also to our duty to eliminate discrimination and mainstream equalities, manage our records to the satisfaction of the Keeper of Records, protect data and provide information on request and in line with current law.

Conduct a full household canvass under the individual electoral registration (IER) regime.

The canvass of 278,637 households achieved a return rate of 84% by 1 December 2018. This was a marginal improvement on the corresponding return rate of 83% as at 1 December 2017. Into 2019 we continued to chase up non-returns and by mid-March the return rate had risen to 85%. We also managed to increase the proportion of households who responded to the canvass by automated response channels such as online, text or automated telephone options from 95,704 in 2017 to 104,965 in 2018. Automated responses are more efficient as they require less back-office processing.

Publish revised registers 1 December 2018.

We completed the household canvass earlier than in previous years and published revised registers on 1 December 2018. A qualitative and quantitative assessment carried out by the Electoral Commission concluded that we met their canvass performance standards.

Maximise valuation roll appeal resolution.

The 2017 revaluation had a significant impact on ratepayers in the North East and the volume of appeals is greater than had been the case in previous revaluation years. The sensitivity of the situation was principally due to the slowdown in the NE property market that became apparent after the valuation date of 1 April 2015 but before the revaluation values came into force on 1 April 2017. Against this backdrop the service was severely challenged by ratepayers who had been encouraged to lodge appeals against their rateable values through campaigns in mainstream and social media along with advice from high profile professionals and politicians. The resultant heightened level of expectation for significant reductions in values through the appeal resolution process service has been proven to be wrong and the resultant appeal resolution process has therefore been particularly demanding in terms of expertise and resources.

A significant decision published by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court¹ supported our approach, added clarity to the law concerning changes in the economy and has assisted the appeal resolution process. During 2018/19 we have resolved revaluation appeals against assessments for 3,627 properties and a further 3,361 running roll appeals. This represents the highest volume of resolved appeals ever achieved over 12 months in Grampian. In terms of accuracy, figures published by the Scottish Government show that the losses in rateable value through resolution of Revaluation appeals in Grampian is the lowest in Scotland².

Maintain a complete and accurate Valuation rolls and valuation lists.

The last two priorities use of quantitative target based performance indicators rather than qualitative measures and as such can at times be misleading. We have increased the number of assessments of domestic and non-domestic properties being made within the 90 day performance timeframe when compared to the previous year by 6% with 4,882 assessments in 2018/19 compared to 4,619 for 2017/18. We met our performance target of 94% of new dwellings being banded in the 90 day timeframe but did not manage to make 70% of valuation roll updates within the same 90 day timeframe. The concentration of our resources on our priority of maximising appeal resolution rates impacted here to the extent that 59% of updates were made within the 90 day timeframe.

In overall terms the organisation met its priorities for 2018/19. It has worked tirelessly to give ratepayers in the Grampian area, not only extremely accurate rateable values, but also maximised appeal resolution volumes to provide the certainty that is so important to property occupiers and taxpayers. Meantime it has rolled out a new IT system for electoral registration and continued to deliver routine business as usual canvass, rolling registration, running roll and council tax update. Once again, the organisation has shown itself to be capable of responding and delivering.

¹ The Assessor for Grampian v Anderson, Anderson and Brown LLP and others 2018 at <https://www.scotcourts.gov.uk/docs/default-source/cos-general-docs/pdf-docs-for-opinions/2018csih15.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

² Non-domestic Rates Revaluation Appeals 2018-19 Q4 <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Local-Government-Finance/NDR-Rates-Relief/Appeals2018-19Q4>

Data tables

Table 1 shows the number of new dwellings added to the lists in Grampian over the last 5 years and also the percentage that received notification within the 3 and 6 month performance windows. Table 1 also shows the performance thresholds that have been set.

Table 1 The time taken to add new dwellings to the list

Year	Number	Within 3 months		Within 6 months	
		Threshold	Actual	Threshold	Actual
2018/19	3,524	94%	94%	97%	98%
2017/18	3,231	94%	91%	97%	97%
2016/17	3,345	94%	92%	97%	98%
2015/16	3,009	94%	93%	97%	98%
2014/15	2,650	92%	92%	97%	97%

Table 2 shows the number of alterations made to the roll each year along with the percentage of alterations that were made within the 3 and 6 month performance windows. The performance thresholds are also provided. Alterations include new entries to the valuation roll for newly constructed or converted buildings as well as alterations to existing buildings. The years 2016/17 and 2018/19 are shown in *italics* as these are years when we were revaluing all non-domestic properties or dealing with record volumes of appeals in addition to our routine maintenance of the roll. For this reason resources were diverted to revaluation or appeal related tasks with a corresponding impact on our routine maintenance performance.

Table 2 The time taken to alter the Valuation Roll

Year	Number	Within 3 months		Within 6 months	
		Threshold	Actual	Threshold	Actual
<i>2018/19</i>	<i>2,668</i>	<i>70%</i>	<i>59%</i>	<i>85%</i>	<i>77%</i>
<i>2017/18</i>	<i>2,576</i>	<i>77%</i>	<i>66%</i>	<i>90%</i>	<i>83%</i>
<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2,129</i>	<i>60%</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>85%</i>	<i>75%</i>
<i>2015/16</i>	<i>2,474</i>	<i>77%</i>	<i>61%</i>	<i>90%</i>	<i>78%</i>
<i>2014/15</i>	<i>2,200</i>	<i>77%</i>	<i>68%</i>	<i>90%</i>	<i>85%</i>

Table 3 provides the local government registers total electorate, the number of households we canvassed, the canvass response rate and the number of households that responded using our online/SMS text and phone response service rather than completing and posting the household enquiry form to us. The register published on 10 March 2014 was the last register revision based on the traditional household canvass prior to the introduction of individual electoral registration on 17 September 2014. A full canvass was not conducted in 2014/15 as this coincided with the national implementation of individual electoral registration (IER). The impact of no national elections during 2017/18 is reflected in a reduction in electorate in our revised registers published on 1 December 2018. This phenomenon is common across Scotland and underlines how elector engagement is strongly driven by electoral events rather than household canvasses. The number of households canvassed has reduced marginally as new rules were introduced that meant

that single person households who had recently applied to register were not required to be canvassed.

Table 3 Electorate and canvass details for Grampian

Register	Local Government Electorate	Number of households canvassed	Canvass Response Rate	Automated responses
1 Dec 2018	432,135	278,637	84%	104,965
1 Dec 2017	438,674	279,278	83%	95,704
1 Dec 2016	439,590	276,439	79%	79,606
1 Dec 2015	436,748	273,173	75%	64,040
27 Feb 2015	444,256	n/a	n/a	n/a
10 Mar 2014	445,541	269,163	95%	88,481

Conclusion

During 2018/19 the priority has been to maximise appeal resolution, to give businesses in NE Scotland the certainty that they require in terms of non-domestic rates liabilities. This has been assisted through the Lands Valuation Appeal Court decision upholding our approach and achieved through the absolute professionalism and dedication of our surveyors and negotiators who have been working in an extremely challenging environment.

Our agility and capacity to respond to challenges was tested late in the year when the likelihood of a European Parliamentary Election became a reality just as the roll-out of new electoral registration system neared completion. The election date was announced on 10 April 2019 and will feature in next year's public performance report. The issue for 2018/19 was that the work done through procuring, specifying and implementing the new system in 2018/19 ensured that we were able to successfully meet the demands and challenges of such a short-notice national electoral event, including the specific requirements for EU citizen declarations.

The continued high performance levels recorded in this report are a product of the professionalism, dedication and commitment of the employees of the organisation. I continue to be extremely grateful to my colleagues who work to ensure that the statutory duties of the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer are delivered in a customer focussed and effective manner to all the communities that make up the Grampian area.

Ian H Milton
Grampian Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer

Woodhill House, Westburn Road, Aberdeen AB16 5GE
01224 068370
assessor@grampian-vjb.gov.uk