



Grampian Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer

Public performance report for 2019/20

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 2019/20 was £4.248M against a budget of £4.463 that was net of additional grant funding of £0.152M provided under the UK government's Electoral Registration Transformation Programme. The Assessor & ERO has a full-time equivalent of 74 posts distributed between offices in Aberdeen, Banff and Elgin. As at 31 March 2020 there were 66 full-time equivalent staff in post. In the last year staff absence due to ill health was 4.2%. This is high compared to the previous year's absence levels of between 1.7% and 2.5% and reflects long-term conditions of a small number of employees.

A review of our 2019/20 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 282,999 households achieved a return rate of 79%. 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 107,977 in 2019. Automated responses are more efficient as they require less back-office processing.

Publish revised registers 1 December 2019.

In common with a number of other Scottish EROs, we postponed publication of the register to 1 February 2020 whilst we focussed on the by-elections and snap UK parliamentary election of the autumn and winter. The overall growth in electorate from 1 December 2018 to 1 February 2020 was over 3% with the Westminster franchise electorate rising from 405,885 to 419,702 and the local government franchise electorate rising from 432,135 to 445,960. An assessment carried out by the Electoral Commission concluded that we met the 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. The organisation has continued to be severely challenged by ratepayers pursuing appeals against their rateable values and the resultant appeal resolution process has continued to be particularly demanding throughout 2019/20 in terms of expertise and resources. For the second year running the organisation has however resolved a record volume of appeals with revaluation appeals against 3,832 properties resolved and further 933 running roll appeals resolved. In terms of accuracy, for the third consecutive year losses in rateable value through resolution of revaluation appeals in Grampian was the lowest in Scotland¹.

The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Scotland in early 2020 resulted in a large volume of appeals being lodged on the grounds that the pandemic had had an impact on value. Over 7,800 appeals were received between 31 December 2019 and 31 March 2020 with the vast majority being lodged during the last two weeks of March 2020. The organisation, although rebased from operational offices to home-based working on 23 March had arrangements in place to log, verify and acknowledge receipt of this unprecedented volume of running roll appeals and also deal with a completely new service priority that was introduced by the introduction of business support grants and awards that were based on the valuation roll as at 17 March 2020. Survey staff responded to high volumes of priority enquiries generated by the Covid-19 support grant regime.

Maintain 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. The extraordinary demands of the appeal resolution process along with staff retirements and the pandemic-related unprecedented volume of appeals lodged, Covid-19 business grant enquiries and the move to home-based working have all impacted on the organisation's performance. Our performance on updating the council tax valuation list slipped from 94% to 90% of new dwellings being added to the list within 90 days and we maintained our 2018/19 performance for updating the valuation roll to the extent that 59% of updates were made within the 90 day timeframe. In doing so we missed our performance targets of 94% of new dwellings being banded in the 90 day timeframe and 70% of valuation roll updates within the same 90 day timeframe.

However, on taking a fair view and in particular taking account of the extraordinary events and challenges that the organisation met, including two unscheduled national elections,

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2019/08/non-domestic-rates-revaluation-appeals/documents/2019-20/non-domestic-rates-revaluation-appeals-2019-20-q4-bulletin/non-domestic-rates-revaluation-appeals-2019-20-q4-bulletin/govscot%3Adocument/RVAPP%2B2019-20%2BQ4%2B-%2BPublication%2B-%2BBulletin.pdf>

unprecedented levels of appeal activity, new service priorities and operational re-basing, the organisation has addressed and met its original priorities and at the same time embraced unprecedented new priorities with an agility and professionalism that has ensured uninterrupted service delivery.

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
2019/20	3,437	94%	90%	97%	97%
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%

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, 2018/19 and 2019/20 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>2019/20</i>	<i>1,984</i>	<i>70%</i>	<i>59%</i>	<i>85%</i>	<i>77%</i>
<i>2018/19</i>	<i>2,668</i>	<i>70%</i>	<i>59%</i>	<i>85%</i>	<i>77%</i>
2017/18	2,576	77%	66%	90%	83%
<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2,129</i>	<i>60%</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>85%</i>	<i>75%</i>
2015/16	2,474	77%	61%	90%	78%

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 automated response service rather than completing and posting the household enquiry form to us. Since the introduction of online registration in 2014 it has been recognised that elector engagement is strongly driven by electoral events along with a trend towards less engagement in the annual canvass during an election year. The data illustrates this trend; no national elections took place in 2018, the electorate declined and canvass responses increased, whereas European and UK parliamentary elections took place in 2019 and in that year the electorate increased and the canvass response rate declined.

Table 3 Electorate and canvass details for Grampian

Register	Local Government Electorate	Number of households canvassed	Canvass Response Rate	Automated responses
1 Feb 2020	445,960	282,999	79%	107,977
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

Conclusion

The nature of our services dictate that the organisation must have the planning and resources in place to not only address its service planning in a proactive and efficient fashion, but also must have the capacity and agility to react to major new priorities and demands with little or no advance notice. The year 2019/20 has tested both our proactive planning and reactive response to demands with a series of events and occurrences that at the start of 2019/20 were not part of our service planning for the year, but nevertheless had to be accommodated with service outcomes delivered. The announcement on 10 April that the European Parliamentary elections were to take place followed by a snap UK Parliamentary election held in December and then the unique challenges of the global pandemic and the need to re-base the organisation to homeworking during March and at the same time handle a large volume of business grant related enquiries and log an unprecedented volume of valuation appeals made in response to the pandemic tested the organisation.

The organisation however rose to each of these challenges illustrating again 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.

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