



Grampian Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer

Public performance report for 2020/21

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 2020/21 was £4.177M against a budget of £4.833M. The Assessor & ERO has a full-time equivalent of 83 posts distributed between offices in Aberdeen, Banff and Elgin. As at 31 March 2021 there were 66 full-time equivalent staff in post. In the last year staff absence due to ill health was under 1% and compares well to the previous year's level of 4.2%.

A review of our 2020/21 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 annual canvass of households has been the subject of major reform and the 2020 canvass was the first canvass where data matching was used at the outset of the canvass to help identify those properties where the residents are more likely to have changed. Canvass Communication letters (CCA) advising who was on the register were issued to around 190,000 households where we held matched data - a response was only required where there were changes. Different Canvass Communication letters (CCB) were issued to around 95,000 households where there was unmatched data - a response was required from these households. A total of around 69,000 automated responses were received. The revised canvass model therefore means that a comparison of return rates and automated responses with a canvass in previous years is not appropriate. Households are still encouraged to use our automated response channels in the first instance as they require less back-office processing and are less costly for the public purse. An assessment carried out by the Electoral Commission concluded that we met the canvass performance standards.

Publish revised registers 1 December 2020.

The revised registers were published on 1 December 2020. The local government franchise electorate rose from 445,690 to 448,331 between 1 February 2020 and 1 December 2020 with the Westminster franchise electorate dropping marginally from 419,702 to 418,605 over the same period.

Maximise Valuation Roll appeal resolution.

The 2017 revaluation had a significant impact on ratepayers in the area and the volume of appeals was greater than had been the case in previous revaluation years. The sensitivity of the situation was principally due to the slowdown in the local 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 the volume of ratepayers pursuing appeals against their rateable values and the resultant appeal resolution process has continued to be particularly demanding throughout 2020/21. In terms of accuracy, the loss in rateable value during 2020/21 through resolution of revaluation appeals in Grampian was again 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 an impact on value. Although the organisation rebased from operational offices to home-based working on 23 March 2020, arrangements were put 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 throughout 2020.

Maintain complete and accurate Valuation Rolls and Valuation Lists.

These last two priorities use quantitative target-based performance indicators rather than qualitative measures and as such can be misleading at times. The extraordinary demands of the appeal resolution process along with staff retirements, the unprecedented volume of pandemic-related 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 90% to 61% of new dwellings being added to the list within 90 days and our performance for updating the Valuation Roll slipped from 59% to 30% 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.

On taking a fair view, and in particular taking account of the unique and extraordinary background to 2020/21, the organisation has performed exceptionally well in fulfilling its statutory requirements to maintain the Valuation Roll and Council Tax Valuation List, albeit with slower turnaround times that were heavily influenced by factors that were external to the organisation.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2019/08/non-domestic-rates-revaluation-appeals/documents/2020-21/non-domestic-rates-revaluation-appeals-2020-21q4-bulletin/non-domestic-rates-revaluation-appeals-2020-21q4-bulletin/govscot%3Adocument/RVAPP%2B2020-21%2BQ4%2B-%2BPublication.pdf>

Data tables

Table 1 shows the number of new dwellings added to the Council Tax Valuation 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 Council Tax Valuation List

| Year | Number | Within 3 months | | Within 6 months | |
|---------|--------|-----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| | | Threshold | Actual | Threshold | Actual |
| 2020/21 | 2,212 | 94% | 61% | 97% | 80% |
| 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% |

Table 2 shows the number of alterations made to the Valuation Roll over the last 5 years 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 and the correction of errors.

Table 2 The time taken to alter the Valuation Roll

| Year | Number | Within 3 months | | Within 6 months | |
|---------|--------|-----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| | | Threshold | Actual | Threshold | Actual |
| 2020/21 | 1,430 | 70% | 30% | 85% | 49% |
| 2019/20 | 1,984 | 70% | 59% | 85% | 77% |
| 2018/19 | 2,668 | 70% | 59% | 85% | 77% |
| 2017/18 | 2,576 | 77% | 66% | 90% | 83% |
| 2016/17 | 2,129 | 60% | 56% | 85% | 75% |

Table 3 provides the local government registers total electorate and the number of households we canvassed.

Table 3 Electorate and canvass details for Grampian

| Register publication date | Local Government Electorate | Number of households canvassed |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 Dec 2020 | 448,331 | 286,999 |
| 1 Feb 2020 | 445,960 | 282,999 |
| 1 Dec 2018 | 432,135 | 278,637 |
| 1 Dec 2017 | 438,674 | 279,278 |
| 1 Dec 2016 | 439,590 | 276,439 |

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 to have the capacity and agility to react to major new priorities and demands with little or no advance notice. The year 2020/21 tested both our proactive planning and reactive response to demands. The unique challenges of the global pandemic and the need to adapt the organisation and its working practices to ensure all staff could work from home in 2020, handle a large volume of business grant related enquiries, log an unprecedented volume of valuation appeals made in response to the pandemic, while also planning and preparing for major elections in May 2021, 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 am 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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