

## **Item: 10**

**Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board: 7 March 2024.**

**Internal Audit of Electoral Roll.**

**Report by Chief Internal Auditor.**

### **1. Purpose of Report**

To present the Electoral Roll Internal Audit Report for Members' scrutiny.

### **2. Recommendations**

**It is recommended:**

#### **2.1.**

That the Board scrutinises the findings of the internal audit reviewing the adequacy of the controls and procedures in place to ensure that the Electoral Rolls published annually for Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council are up to date and accurate, attached as Appendix 1 to this report, in order to obtain assurance that action has been taken or agreed where necessary.

### **3. Background**

#### **3.1.**

The Electoral Roll is a list of names and addresses of those who are qualified to vote at different elections and referendums. The Roll is published annually in December.

#### **3.2.**

The objective of this audit was to review the controls and procedures in place to ensure that the Electoral Roll published annually for Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council are up to date and accurate.

### **4. Audit Findings**

#### **4.1.**

The audit provides substantial assurance that the processes and procedures relating to the Electoral Roll are well controlled and managed.

#### **4.2.**

The internal audit report, attached as Appendix 1 to this report, includes two low priority recommendations regarding system access rights and the Invitation to Register process. There are no medium or high level recommendations made as a result of this audit.

## **5. Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications associated directly with this report.

## **6. Governance Aspects**

The content and implications of this report have been reviewed and, at this stage, it is deemed that the Board **DOES NOT** require external legal advice in consideration of the recommendations of this report.

## **7. Contact Officer**

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## **8. Appendix**

Appendix 1: Internal Audit Report: Electoral Roll.



# Orkney & Shetland Valuation Joint Board



## Internal Audit

### Audit Report

### O&SVJB – Electoral Roll

Draft issue date: 13 February 2024

Final issue date: 14 February 2024

Distribution list:	O&SVJB Electoral Registration Officer
	O&SVJB Treasurer
	O&SVJB Clerk

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## Audit Opinion

Based on our findings in this review we have given the following audit opinion.

### Substantial

**The framework of governance, risk management and control were found to be comprehensive and effective.**

A key to our audit opinions and level of recommendations is shown at the end of this report.

## Executive Summary

This audit reviewed the adequacy of the controls and procedures in place to ensure that the Register of Electors published annually for Orkney Islands Council (OIC) and Shetland Islands Council (SIC) are up to date and accurate.

Our review identified that the information received in respect of additions to, amendments of and removal of entries to the Electoral Register is processed on a timely basis and accurately recorded in the Register. Applications for Postal Votes are recorded and processed correctly.

Copies of the Electoral Registers have been correctly supplied both free of charge, where appropriate, and in line with the legislation on the fees to other parties. In addition, applications to opt out of the Open Register are correctly processed.

There have been delays in processing applications for a postal vote in Shetland due to vacancies amongst the business support team during the period reviewed. The team is now fully staffed and a catch-up exercise undertaken to remove the backlog. As there have been no elections during the period audited this has had no impact on the franchise of electors. Likewise, there has been a delay in issuing Invitation to Register letters.

The report includes 2 recommendations which have arisen from the audit. The number and priority of the recommendations are set out in the table below. The priority headings assist management in assessing the significance of the issues raised. One recommendation is shared across the Electoral and Valuation operations.

Responsible officers will be required to provide an update on progress with the agreed actions.

Total	High	Medium	Low
2	0	0	2

The assistance provided by officers contacted during this audit is gratefully acknowledged.

## Introduction

The Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board (The Board) was established in 1996, under The Valuation Joint Boards (Scotland) Order 1995, and its primary purpose is to discharge all the functions of its two constituent authorities, Orkney Islands Council (OIC) and Shetland Islands Council (SIC) as valuation authorities under the Valuation Acts.

The Board is responsible for appointing the Assessor for Orkney and Shetland, an independent statutory official responsible for the preparation and maintenance of the Valuation Roll and the Council Tax Valuation List. The Assessor has also been appointed as Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) for both Orkney and Shetland and is, therefore, also responsible for the preparation and maintenance of the Register of Electors or Electoral Roll.

The Register of Electors is a list of names and addresses of those who are qualified to vote at different elections and referendums, which is updated monthly from January to November. A revised Register is published annually on 1<sup>st</sup> December.

By law, the ERO must produce two versions of the register: The Electoral Register and The Open Register. The Open Register is an extract of the Electoral Register that can be bought by any person, company or organisation. Individuals can ask for their name and address to be removed from the Open Register.

The objective of the audit is to review the adequacy of the controls and procedures in place to ensure that the Register of Electors published annually for OIC and SIC are up to date and accurate.

This review was conducted in conformance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards

## Audit Scope

The scope of this audit was as follows:

- It covered the Electoral Registers and Open Registers for the Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands.
- It encompassed the processes of registration, updating and maintenance of the registers.
- It covered requests for exclusion from the Open registers, and any information requests from third parties.
- The audit focussed on both paper and electronic records, together with related databases and systems.

# Audit Findings

## 1.0 Systems Access and Security

- 1.1 The Board uses a software system called EROS, a commercially available software package from Idox Group. This system is used by a number of other Local Authorities. This software holds the Electoral Registers themselves and manages supporting documents and records in respect of properties.
- 1.2 There are two separate systems hosted by Shetland Islands Council and Orkney Islands Council. To access each system, staff require a Council log in, as well as a unique identifier and password for the Idox software itself. The system tracks who is making amendments to the records.
- 1.3 Once an employee has left, their access rights to both the Council network and Idox are revoked, but we understand that there can be delays in implementing this. Where a person moves to a new post within the Council, they are issued with a new Council IT profile which gives them access to the new systems they need to work with but removes their access to servers holding the EROS system and other ERO records.
- 1.4 A request to withdraw access rights to the Council systems and Idox software with effect from the leaving date should be made at the same time that HR are notified of the intention to leave. This recommendation is shared across both Electoral and Valuation Services.

### Recommendation 1

## 2.0 Households and the Annual Canvass

- 2.1 Information on new, altered and demolished domestic properties is obtained via the valuation operations, from multiple sources, including the local authority Council Tax services. Where details of a new property are provided, Invitation to Register (ITR) forms are issued, together with subsequent reminders. Concurrently properties are added to the Electoral Management system. New properties are then included in the next annual household canvass.
- 2.2 Audit testing showed that for the period under review, less than 50% overall of the new property entries to the Council Tax Valuation Lists sampled were matched by new entries in the Electoral Register (7 out of 14 samples for Orkney and 2 out of 7 for Shetland).
- 2.3 During the period under review, the administrative side of the Electoral operations in both Orkney and Shetland have experienced extended staff vacancies, and this combined with the necessary prioritisation of remaining staff time towards statutory requirements and the implementation of the Elections Act 2022, has resulted in fewer ITR forms being issued, and fewer households being added to the Electoral Register.
- 2.4 We recommend that wherever possible ITR forms should be issued within 2 months of receiving notification from the valuation operations, and that any remaining backlog of ITR forms to be issued be cleared as soon as possible.

### Recommendation 2

### **3.0 Registration Applications and Accuracy**

- 3.1 Registration and change of details applications can be made online or via paper forms. The details from these are entered into the EROS digital electoral system, and 'matched' to other information held by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to confirm the identity of the elector. If no match or a partial match result is returned additional supporting information is sought and obtained.
- 3.2 EROS also includes information received via the annual household Canvass forms and responses to Invitation to Register forms issued by the Electoral Officer, which is also subject to the matching process.
- 3.3 Once the registration application has been accepted, the ERO issues a Confirmation of Addition letter via post or email. Electoral legislation requires that these confirmation letters be sent out 'before the publication of the next notice of alteration or before the publication of the revised register.'
- 3.4 Our audit testing looked at the accuracy of the details being entered into the EROS system, together with supporting evidence of identity, and also looked at the key dates in the process, i.e. the effective date that the elector was added to the register and the date that the confirmation letter / email was sent. There were 1,004 total additions to the electoral register in Orkney in the period from January to October 2023, and we sampled 23 of these additions (2.3% coverage). For Shetland, total additions to the electoral register was 702 and we sampled 14 of these (2% coverage).
- 3.5 Audit testing showed that details of electors are being added to the EROS system correctly, with a few minor non-significant omissions such as middle names. All additions to the Register had been matched via the DWP or additional supporting information had been obtained. In addition, confirmation letters or emails had all been issued in accordance with the statutory timescales set out in 3.3 above.

### **No Recommendation**

### **4.0 Changes of Details**

- 4.1 Details on changes in names, address or nationality, and in the elector's status of opting out of the Open register or not, can be modified by submission of a paper Change of Name form, or re-registering with new details online. In addition, changes of details are also captured using the annual Canvass return. Where the Canvass return is the prompt for the change it is necessary to have additional supporting documentation to support the amendment. Following the amendment, a letter is issued to confirm the amended details before the changes are made in the monthly update to the Register.
- 4.2 Amendments or modifications to existing records were identified from spreadsheets collating the monthly updates for Shetland and Orkney for January to October 2023. There were a total of 18 amendments in Shetland and 43 amendments in Orkney.
- 4.3 A test sample of 4 amendments from Shetland and 5 from Orkney was selected, giving coverage of 22% for Shetland and 11.3% for Orkney. The amendments selected covered marriage, divorce, change of house and street name details and changes in nationality.
- 4.4 Audit testing looked at both the accuracy of the amended information reflected in the electoral roll, compliance with the requirement for additional information where appropriate

and the timescale for making amendments and issuing correspondence to confirm the amendment.

- 4.5 Audit testing showed that for the sample assessed details of the change taken from the source documentation was accurately reflected in the updated electoral roll. Additional supporting evidence had been provided where required. Finally, both the processing of amendments and the issuing of confirmation correspondence is done on a timely basis.

**No Recommendation**

## **5.0 Removals**

- 5.1 Electors are removed from the electoral roll in response to deaths or registration in a new electoral area. In addition, if an elector registers at a new address within the same electoral area, they are removed from the prior address. There is no facility to allow a person to remove their entry in the register whilst they remain resident.

- 5.2 The removal of an elector requires that the ERO make a determination that they are no longer entitled to be registered. A determination can be made without review

- where the ERO has received an appropriate notification of death,
- where the elector has registered in a new electoral area, or
- there is information from at least two sources that would support a determination.

If the ERO has not been able to obtain a second source of information, a type A review should be undertaken.

- 5.3 There were 1,208 removals in Orkney and 686 in Shetland. The sample taken was 20 from Orkney (1.65% coverage) and 15 from Shetland (2.2% coverage).

- 5.4 We found that all the samples tested either fell within the criteria for making a determination without review or a Notice of Review had been issued and a review subsequently undertaken. Accordingly, all controls around the removal of electors from the roll appear to be operating satisfactorily.

**No Recommendation**

## **6.0 Postal votes**

- 6.1 With effect from 31 October 2023, applications in respect of 'reserved' Westminster elections may be made in writing or online via the gov.uk website. Applications for a postal vote in respect of devolved Scottish Local Government or Scottish Parliamentary elections can be made by paper application only. Depending on the election in question, postal votes can be put in place for a particular poll, a definite period or an indefinite period.

- 6.2 For the period December 2022 to September 2023, there were 256 applications for a postal vote processed for Orkney, and 68 processed for Shetland. The figure for Shetland is low as a result of vacancies amongst the business support staff resulting in a backlog building up. These vacancies have now been filled and a further 200 postal applications processed in October 2023.



- 6.3 A sample of 7 applications from Orkney (2.7% of total) and 5 from Shetland (7.4% of total) were tested, based on the lists of all individuals recorded as having a postal vote.
- 6.4 For all electors sampled from the lists of individuals recorded as having a postal vote in place, the supporting records confirmed that there had been a specific request for a postal vote, the details in respect of the length of time the postal vote had been issued for were correct, and a confirmation letter in respect of the Postal Vote had been issued.

**No Recommendation**

## **7.0 Open Electoral Register**

- 7.1 The Open Register is available for anyone who wishes to buy a copy. The Full Register is available for credit agencies and others to purchase in accordance with Regulations. It is possible to opt out of the open register, and an increasing number of people are opting out.
- 7.2 Audit testing was done on the sample of additions to the electoral register from 3.4 above, 23 from Orkney and 14 from Shetland. The details from the application documents were checked to the status of the elector in respect of opting out of the open register as shown on the Electoral Roll.
- 7.3 All but one of the electors in the sample had application documentation which matched the opted out / included status in the December register. For the elector where there was a discrepancy between the status shown in the documentation and the status on the register, this came about because the elector made 2 applications to register. The first, which was the source of the application details, did not include a request to opt out of the open register. On the second application, 2 months later, the elector did opt out of the register, and it is this position that is reflected in the open register of December 2023.

**No Recommendation**

## **8.0 Sales and Distribution of Registers**

- 8.1 Certain organisations or individuals as listed by the Electoral Commission (the EC list) are entitled to receive registration data automatically or on request, and free of charge. The EC list also sets out which specific information they are entitled to, e.g., the full register, list of overseas voters, etc.
- 8.2 Audit testing was done on all entries on the Orkney and Shetland lists where the registers were provided free of charge. We found that the relevant organisations or individuals were included on the EC list, and the information provided to them was in accordance with the entitlement of that organisation or individual.
- 8.3 In addition, certain institutions such as credit agencies can purchase a copy of the full Register and the list of overseas voters, and anyone can buy a copy of the Open Register. The charges to be made for the provision of these registers are set out in legislation.
- 8.4 During the period of review, the ERO received 5 'commercial' requests in respect of the Orkney Register, and 7 in respect of the Shetland Register. Audit testing was done on samples of 3 each from these, giving coverage of 60% for Orkney and 42.9% for Shetland. We found that the relevant organisations:

- fulfilled the criteria to receive the full Register
- received information in accordance with the entitlement of that organisation
- were invoiced with fees in line with the legislation
- paid the necessary fees in a timely manner.

**No Recommendation**

## Action Plan

Recommendation	Priority	Management Comments	Responsible Officer	Agreed Completion Date
<p>1 A request to withdraw access rights to the Council systems and Idox software with effect from the leaving date should be made at the same time that HR are notified of the intention to leave. This recommendation is shared across both Electoral and Valuation Services.</p>	<p>Low</p>	<p>Shetland – On SIC IT’s IFS Assyst system an end date can be entered on a User Network Request and this shall be logged when an end date for a staff member is agreed.</p> <p>Orkney – Complete the staff member leaving document located on OIC IT Intranet page and forward to IT.Support@orkney.gov.uk</p> <p>Idox – This is controlled within each local office and the staff member can be ‘Deactivated’ on EROS on the first working day after leaving.</p>	<p>Shetland Depute Electoral Registration Officer</p> <p>Orkney Business Support Officer</p>	<p>As and when required.</p>
<p>2 Wherever possible ITR forms should be issued within 2 months of receiving notification from the Valuation operations, and that any remaining backlog of ITR forms to be issued be cleared as soon as possible.</p>	<p>Low</p>	<p>With a full compliment of Business Support staff new properties will receive ITRs within two months of inclusion in the Valuation List unless there is an issue with that specific property.</p>	<p>Shetland Depute Electoral Registration Officer</p> <p>Orkney Business Support Officer</p>	<p>Any currently outstanding properties will be actioned by end of March 2024.</p>

## Key to Opinion and Priorities

### Audit Opinion

Opinion	Definition
<b>Substantial</b>	The framework of governance, risk management and control were found to be comprehensive and effective.
<b>Adequate</b>	Some improvements are required to enhance the effectiveness of the framework of governance, risk management and control.
<b>Limited</b>	There are significant weaknesses in the framework of governance, risk management and control such that it could be or become inadequate and ineffective.
<b>Unsatisfactory</b>	There are fundamental weaknesses in the framework of governance, risk management and control such that it is inadequate and ineffective or is likely to fail.

### Recommendations

Priority	Definition	Action Required
<b>High</b>	Significant weakness in governance, risk management and control that if unresolved exposes the organisation to an unacceptable level of residual risk.	Remedial action must be taken urgently and within an agreed timescale.
<b>Medium</b>	Weakness in governance, risk management and control that if unresolved exposes the organisation to a significant level of residual risk.	Remedial action should be taken at the earliest opportunity and within an agreed timescale.
<b>Low</b>	Scope for improvement in governance, risk management and control.	Remedial action should be prioritised and undertaken within an agreed timescale.