

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

23 January 2014

Agenda Item	6
Report No	VAL 3/14

Departmental Report

Report by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer

Summary

This report outlines the main business of the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer's department since the last meeting of the Board.

1. General

The main business of the department since the last meeting of the Board concerned the disposal of the remaining revaluation appeals at various hearings before the Valuation Appeal Committee. The annual electoral canvass also formed a significant workload for the department together with continuing preparations for the introduction of individual electoral registration (IER). In conjunction with the Returning Officer the department facilitated two by-elections. Maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list continued throughout the period. These matters are dealt with in greater detail below.

2. Electoral Registration

The electoral canvass is entering the closing stages with final reminders due to be issued next week to households that have not responded. The canvass this year covers a longer period and included the Christmas break. The extended canvass has resulted in an extended period between reminders and it was timetabled to avoid issuing forms over the peak Christmas holiday period. The return rate for the annual canvass indicates an improvement on recent years, something that is not universally reported throughout Scotland. A doorstep canvass is underway, targeting long term non responders and other households where it is anticipated that the postal canvass shall not yield a result. The revised register will be published on 10 March.

Two local government by-elections have been held, one in Ward 4, Landward Caithness, on 28 November and the other in Ward 10, Black Isle, on 19 December. Arrangements were made for these elections in conjunction with the Returning Officer. These elections were concluded successfully from the ERO's perspective and there have been no complaints received or issues raised.

In light of the occurrence of a European election on 22 May 2014, an exercise is in the course of being undertaken this month to establish whether or not relevant

European citizens wish to vote in Scotland or in their native country in May. This work involves writing to the electors involved and asking them to confirm their intentions.

Preparatory work associated with the introduction of individual electoral registration continues with the introduction having been confirmed for September 2014. The “confirmation dry run” was carried out in August, involving matching the Electoral Register with databases of the Department of Work and Pensions. The results of this process have been used to project the numbers of various types of form issue that will be required to be issued when the transfer to individual registration is triggered immediately after the Scottish referendum in 2014. Indications are that the level of matching will be at or above that achieved for the country as a whole. In addition to this work, the process of upgrading software and systems in preparation for both the referendum and the introduction of individual electoral registration is proceeding by stages. Further careful planning will be required to program the remainder of this work around the statutory processes and the requirement for staff training. Initial staff training has now been arranged and the first phase shall take place in March. Detailed implementation plans have now been compiled and will be continuously improved and updated to support the process of change through to 2015. It is to be hoped that we shall shortly be advised of the specific capabilities that are to be provided by the upgraded software within our electoral computerised systems, which will allow these plans to be further clarified.

Work continues in co-operation with other ERO’s with a view to co-ordinating publicity efforts to complement those of the Electoral Commission and to fill any gaps that are identified through joint ventures where appropriate. One such initiative has been successfully carried out in collaboration with Grampian, Tayside, Dundee and Orkney & Shetland ERO’s to promote a television advertising campaign towards the end of last year. Further possibilities are in the course of being identified and consultation is taking place with the Returning Officer to consider any joint initiatives that may be appropriate, particularly in relation to the registration of young voters for the Referendum on Scottish Independence.

We are now receiving more detailed advice from the Cabinet Office relating to the specific timetable for the confirmation run against Department of Work and Pensions Data in September and the consequential “write out” to households and electors.

Otherwise the focus in the forthcoming months shall be the rolling out of staff training prior to public engagement.

3. Valuation for Rating

During the last six months of the calendar year, the principal activity has been the clearance of revaluation rating appeals. Around 2400 appeals have been disposed of throughout this period. While most of these were resolved by negotiation, a number of substantive cases have been heard by the Valuation Appeal Committee. All of these have now been closed within the statutory timescale. The remaining appeals, of which there are 106, will require to be cited for hearing by the Lands

Tribunal for Scotland. It is to be expected that these appeals will be cited for hearing by the Tribunal during the course of this calendar year.

Members will be aware that a case that was recently heard by the Valuation Appeal Committee was reported in the local press. A stated case has now been requested by the ratepayer with a view to making an appeal to the Lands Valuation Appeal Court in Edinburgh.

Maintenance of the valuation roll continues in an orderly fashion. While there has been a slight reduction in time related performance, efforts are now being made to improve performance against this measure once the current appeal activity is concluded.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues as a matter of routine. It has proven possible to maintain time related performance over the last few months on slightly increased volumes. The level of appeal in relation to council tax is minimal and there is a Valuation Appeal Committee scheduled at the end of this month to dispose of outstanding council tax appeals.

5. Administration

The main administrative business has related to the preparation of the annual budget and the provision of detailed plans for the implementation of IER. Work has started regarding the review of administrative policies and other issues of corporate governance and it is intended to submit a number of updated policies at the next Board meeting.

6. Recommendation

The Board is invited to note the recent activities of the department as set out in this report.

Designation: Assessor and ERO

Date: 13 January 2014

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