

# HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

11 September 2014

Agenda Item	10
Report No	VAL 19/14

## 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 has continued to be that of Electoral Registration, although we have also taken cases before the Valuation Appeal Committee in respect of both non-domestic rating and council tax. General maintenance of the Valuation Roll and Council Tax list has continued throughout this period. These matters are dealt with in greater detail below.

#### 2. Electoral Registration

The Ward 12 by-election of the Highland Council took place on 1 May and the European Election was held on 22 May. All of the statutory and operational deadlines were met and all necessary information was passed to the Returning Officer timeously for both elections. It was however a very busy period, with considerable pressures on staff that were compounded by issues relating to the computer systems. Consequently staff were working very long hours and very late in the evening in order that deadlines could be met. These issues have been addressed which should alleviate some of these pressures in the future.

The interest in postal voting continues to grow and there were 34,809 electors registered for postal voting at the time of the European Election.

Overall the European Election passed with few problems. One clerical error was reported on the day of the Election and this was corrected before close of the poll.

Each European country was written to in advance of the poll indicating the identities of that country's citizens who had opted to cast their vote in the Highland & Comhairle nan Eilean Siar electoral areas.

My previous report made reference to young voters who will be eligible to vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum. Indications suggest that a high level of registration has been achieved. The issue of the general awareness of young voters as to whether or not they were registered was mentioned in my last report and I can confirm that I wrote to all 16 and 17 year olds who had been successfully registered as young voters advising them of that fact and offering them the opportunity to vote by post if they were any doubt about their ability to visit their polling station on the day of the referendum. A further exercise was carried out to identify those that have recently moved into the area and where they could be identified, they have been sent letters inviting them to register.

The general level of activity as a consequence of the referendum has reached unprecedented levels in recent weeks. The level of written and telephone enquiry has proved challenging for staff who are also attempting to consider and process applications to register and applications for postal votes on a daily basis. I am pleased to report that the level of staff good will has been excellent and they have willingly worked additional hours in the morning, evening and at weekends in an effort to keep abreast of the enormous workload.

Preparatory work associated with the introduction of individual electoral registration continues. A number of separate training days were carried out to cascade the Cabinet Office training to all members of staff. The nature and quantity of training provided has been tailored to correspond to the likely exposure of particular staffing groups to the new regime. Further staff members have now attended training in the use of the revised software systems and this shall be cascaded to other members of staff following the referendum. It remains unclear at this stage the nature of additional support that may be required from other software suppliers.

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.

Testing has yet to be completed in conjunction with the Cabinet Office relating to the secure data links necessary for the confirmation run against Department of Work and Pensions Database later this month.

A contract has now been put in place through Fujitsu to provide the necessary printing for the IER write out using the services of Document Outsourcing Limited.

The continued focus in the forthcoming months shall be the rolling out of further staff training, further honing and execution of the public engagement strategy and continued detailed planning for the data matching and consequential write-out together with the consequential doorstep canvass.

### **3. Valuation for Rating**

The period since the Board meeting in May has largely involved the continued maintenance of the valuation roll.

A number of valuation appeal hearings have taken place and a stated case is in the course of being prepared for a potential hearing by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court.

A number of cases are due to be cited for hearing by the Lands Tribunal over the course of the winter and negotiations have commenced with agents.

#### **4. Council Tax**

The level of appeal in relation to Council Tax remains minimal and these are being referred to the Valuation Appeal Committee for hearing on a regular basis in an effort to avoid unnecessary backlogs.

#### **5. Administration**

The main administrative business has been the provision of detailed plans for the implementation of IER together with end of year financial reporting. Work continues regarding the review of administrative policies and other issues of corporate governance; however, this work has been held back due to the additional workload of the Scottish Independence Referendum. A revised policy – Code of Conduct for Employees – is submitted for approval at this Board meeting, and it is intended to submit additional updated policies at the next Board meeting in November.

#### **6. Staffing**

Following consultation with the Board's Personnel Adviser, the post of office manager has been advertised internally. Selection interviews shall take place later this month.

#### **7. Recommendation**

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

Designation: Assessor and ERO

Date: 1 September 2014

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