

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

13 November 2014

Agenda Item	8
Report No	VAL 24/14

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 and in particular that of the Scottish Independence Referendum (SIR). There has also been a sitting of the Valuation Appeal Committee in respect of non-domestic rating. 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 Scottish Independence Referendum took place on 18 September. All of the statutory and operational deadlines were met and all necessary information was passed to the Returning Officer timeously. It was however an extremely busy period, with enormous pressures on staff. Staff were working very long hours and very late in the evening in order that deadlines could be met. These pressures occurred due to the unprecedented public interest in the referendum. As well as additions to the register, there was a particular interest in registering for absent votes. This resulted in a build-up of pressure at each of the statutory cut off points. Indeed staff worked through the night to provide the final absent voting file to the printers.

The final number of electors who registered for an absent vote was 44,108. This represented an increase of more than 25% compared with the European Election, but when the number of existing permanent absent voting registrations was taken into account, this represented a many fold increase over previous elections.

A further matter for concern was the change in the regulations for emergency proxy voting which increased the scope for applications and reduced the requirement for attestation. While applying the regulations in a fair and consistent manner proved to be challenging in these circumstances, the regulations were applied and there was general satisfaction with a relatively low number of elector complaints.

The general level of activity as a consequence of the referendum reached unprecedented levels. The level of written and telephone enquiry continued right up until polling day. This proved challenging for staff who were 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 goodwill continued to be excellent and they 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. Further training has now taken place on the use of the new software and this included a day in Dingwall where the software supplier trained our staff along with representatives from Orkney, Shetland and the Scottish Borders. This training will continue to be cascaded to other members of staff. It still 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 EROs 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.

The confirmation run matching our records against those of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) was completed, although the results were received late due to an error in the file returned from the DWP. This has led to a consequential delay in writing to electors to either confirm their registration or provide them with an invitation to register, although these are being issued this week and still fall within the general timeframe that is allowed. The overall match rates were consistent with those achieved at the confirmation dry run and led to the automatic confirmation of around 83% of the electorate.

The focus in the forthcoming months shall be the completion of the write out and doorstep canvass of non-responders together with the continued execution of the public engagement strategy.

3. Valuation for Rating

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

A valuation appeal hearing has taken place and a further hearing is due next week. This shall result in a clearing down of nearly all outstanding cases at that time. A stated case is being finalised for a potential hearing by the Lands Valuation Appeal Court.

Negotiations have now commenced in relation to a number of cases that are due to be cited for hearing by the Lands Tribunal over the course of the winter and spring.

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. Maintenance of the Council Tax List is continuing as routine.

5. Administration

The main administrative business has been the provision of detailed plans for the implementation of IER. 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 and the introduction of IER. While a number of revised policies are submitted for approval at this Board meeting, it is intended to submit additional updated policies at the next Board meeting in January. In particular, these should include matters relating to internal control and governance.

A review of the department's Attendance Management policy was undertaken in line with Highland Council policy and no updates were required to this document.

A Lone Working policy has been developed with a planned implementation date of January 2015. This document has been based on the approved Highland Council Policy and Guidance on managing the risks of lone working.

6. Staffing

Following consultation with the Boards Personnel Adviser, the post of office manager has been filled following selection interviews. This resulted in a further vacancy which has now been filled. The senior staff review which was delegated to the Assessor in consultation with the Board's Personnel Adviser and the Convener and Vice Convener was concluded. This resulted in the implementation of the proposals previously advised to the Board. Following interviews, appointments have been made resulting in the provision of an additional two Assistant Assessors and the deletion of the Depute Assessor post. A principal valuer and an area officer post have also been deleted. This has resulted in a flatter structure and a reduction in one to one reporting. Two temporary electoral assistants have been recruited to deal specifically with matters relating to the introduction of IER.

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: 5 November 2014

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