

Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board held in the Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness, on Thursday, 13 November 2014, at 10.30 a.m.

Present

Representing The Highland Council Mrs H Carmichael
Mr D Bremner
Dr I Cockburn
Mr L Fraser
Mr A Graham

Representing Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Mr J Mackay

Officials in attendance:

Mr B Gillies, Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer
Mrs F Wood, Treasurer's Office
Mrs R Moir, Clerk's Office

Mrs H Carmichael in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs M Paterson and Mr A Duffy of the Highland Council and Mr A MacLeod of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

The Board **NOTED** that there were no declarations of interest expressed.

3. Minutes of Meeting of 11 September 2014 Geàrr-chunntas Coinneamh 11 an t-Sultainn 2014

There had been circulated and were **APPROVED** the Minutes of the Board Meeting of 11 September 2014.

4. Presentation – Individual Electoral Registration Taisbeanadh – Clàradh Taghaidh Dhaoine Fa Leth

The Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) made a presentation to Members on the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration and its impact.

In his briefing, the Assessor and ERO outlined the main features of the new Registration system. Whereas the previous canvass had been by household, with completion of the relevant form by the head of household on behalf of all living there, registration would now be the responsibility of each individual and would require some degree of verification of identity. This change was being introduced nationally to reduce a perception – not necessarily justified – of undue scope for electoral fraud.

Every effort was being made to achieve as many automatic transfers as possible, through cross-matching against other public databases, primarily that held by the Department of Works and Pensions, failing which local data matching was being sought, e.g. via Council Tax lists. Such “green” matches were being automatically transferred and the individuals in question sent a nationally standardised letter informing them of this.

Where no “green” match could be found, forms were being sent out to named individuals inviting registration supported by personal identifiers – in the first instance date of birth and National Insurance number, with a further hierarchy of identifiers then available if required, and ultimately the possibility of personal attestation by a responsible individual. An online registration form was also available.

A series of reminders would be issued where no response was received, with these including at least one personal visit by a canvasser. Continued failure to reply could lead to imposition of a civil penalty.

Alongside these personalised communications, home enquiry forms were also being sent to all domestic addresses with no electors currently registered. These forms were designed to provide information to the ERO and were not in themselves a direct vehicle for registration.

It was recognised that this exercise could cause concern/uncertainty for some individuals, particularly following so closely after the unprecedentedly high level of registration prior to the Scottish Referendum; however, IER had been in the planning for some considerable period of time, was already underway in the rest of the UK, and had no causal link to the Referendum process.

Another area of concern and workload that had emerged was that the information provided in the notification of registration letter had made many electors fully aware for perhaps the first time of the existence of the two separate electoral registers – the general register and the open register, with the latter having already been available for purchase by, e.g., marketing bodies, for a period of some 10-12 years. The Assessor and ERO’s department had received a significant number of enquiries on this in the aftermath of the issue of these letters, with people seeking removal from the open register. It was also highlighted that the invitation to register form included a section for indicating this preference.

During discussion, concern was expressed that it appeared from the terms of the notification letters issued that some previous requests for removal from the open register had not been fulfilled. The Assessor and ERO confirmed that this would be checked.

In response to further questions/comments, he confirmed that a transitional register would apply; that telephone enquiries could be made to his offices; that there would be active canvassing, in particular of “multiple” premises such as schools, colleges, care homes, house in multiple occupation, etc.; that ensuring security of data was a priority; and that a précis note on the new processes could be issued to Members.

The Board **NOTED** the information provided and that a summary briefing note of the main points covered would be emailed to Members.

**5. Annual Report on the 2013/14 Audit
Aithisg Bhliadhnail mu Sgrùdadh 2013/14**

At its meeting held on 11 September 2014, the Board had noted the draft Annual Report on the 2013/14 Audit.

There had been circulated Report No. VAL21/14 comprising the External Auditor's finalised Annual Report on the 2013/14 Audit.

The Board **NOTED** the contents of the report.

**6. Draft Annual Report 2013/14
Dreachd Aithisg Bhliadhnail**

There had been circulated Report No. VAL22/14 comprising the draft Annual Report for 2013/14 prepared by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer and incorporating the Performance Report, together with, as an Appendix, the Audited Statement of Accounts for 2013/14.

The Convener drew attention to her comments in the Introduction to the Report, highlighting significant features of the business undertaken during the year and outlining future challenges. She commended the Report for approval.

The Board **APPROVED** publication of the Report

**7. Revenue Budget Monitoring Statement 2014/15
Aithris Sgrùdaidh a' Bhuidseit Teachd-a-Steach airson 2014/15**

There had been circulated Report No VAL23/14 dated 4 November 2014 comprising a statement and commentary by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer on Revenue Expenditure and Income for the period to 30 September 2014.

In speaking to the report, the Assessor and ERO confirmed that a high proportion of anticipated costs were expected to come through in the latter part of the financial year, such as those relating to employing door-to-door canvassers. It remained the case that the overall year-end outturn was expected to be on budget.

In response to a question, he confirmed that Electoral Registration Officers across Scotland had submitted a claim to the Scottish Government for further assistance in meeting the additional costs arising out of the Scottish Referendum. The share claimed on behalf of this Board amounted to some £40,000.

The Board **NOTED** the contents of the report.

**8. Departmental Report
Aithisg Roinneil**

There had been circulated Report No VAL24/14 dated 5 November 2014 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer outlining the main business of his department since the last meeting of the Board, highlighting in particular the workload involved in Electoral Registration and in particular the Scottish Independence Referendum. General maintenance of the Valuation Roll and Council Tax list had continued and there had been a sitting of the Valuation Appeal Committee in respect of non-domestic rating.

In speaking to the report, the Assessor and ERO highlighted the very low number of clerical errors relating to electoral registration identified and dealt with on the day of the Referendum itself, despite the significant increase in registration workload in the run-up to the vote and the increased pressures and thus scope for error. Only 15 discrepancies had been found across the Board area, only 8 of which had been due to errors by his staff.

He drew attention to the review carried out of the Board's Attendance Management Policy, which had not required amendment, and confirmed that a review of the Board's Policy on Internal Control and Governance would be brought to the Board's next meeting.

He also highlighted the completion of his review of senior management arrangements, as discussed at the Board's meeting on 23 January 2014. In response to a request from the Convener, he confirmed that he would email details of the new structure to Members and provide photographs of the senior management team. He also confirmed his intention to be accompanied at future Board meetings by each of the Assistant Assessors, in turn. A Member suggestion was also made that it would be appropriate for the Board to visit his department's Inverness office.

The Board **NOTED** the recent activities of the department, as set out in the report, and **AGREED** to visit the department's Inverness office at the close of the Board's next meeting.

9. Equalities Mainstreaming and Equalities Outcomes Report Aithisg Àbhaisteachadh Cho-ionannachdan agus Builean Cho-ionannachdan

At its meeting held on 4 April 2013, the Board had noted progress on fulfilling its obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty and had agreed to adopt the set of Equalities Outcomes then proposed. The Board had been advised at that time of a requirement to review equalities practices, policies and outcomes from time to time and it had been suggested that this might be done at the end of 2014.

There had been circulated Report No VAL25/14 dated October 2014 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer setting out a draft amended Equalities Mainstreaming and Equalities Outcomes Report.

In speaking to the report, the Assessor and ERO highlighted those areas where amendments had been made in light of comments made by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (Scotland) (EHRC(S)) and confirmed that the current draft should accordingly be regarded as amended and not merely updated. These amendments had included introducing greater clarity on the Highland Council consultation processes on which the Board had relied and

also on the measures to be used in tracking progress on the Equalities Outcomes.

During discussion, attention was drawn to the format of the Gender Pay Gap Data appended to the report. It was suggested that averaging out male and female salaries, as shown, was not in itself very informative without greater clarity on banding, qualifications requirements, etc., and the opportunity to compare within bands/functions. The Assessor and ERO undertook to revisit the format used for future reports, but sought Member approval of the current document as circulated, in order to meet the reporting deadlines set by the EHRC(S).

The Board **NOTED** the further progress made, and that the format used for setting out the Gender Pay Gap Data would be revisited for future reports; and **AGREED** to adopt the updated set of Equalities Outcomes, taking into account the observations made by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (Scotland).

10. Departmental Policy Reviews **Ath-sgrùdaidhean Poileasaidh Roinneil**

At its meeting held on 21 November 2013, the Board had noted a verbal update by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer setting out a proposed work programme of future Board business, during which he had advised that a number of departmental policies, in particular personnel policies, would be brought to the Board over the following year for review.

i. Lone Working Policy **Poileasaidh Obrachadh Aonaranach**

There had been circulated Report No VAL26/14 dated 4 November 2014 comprising reviewed Lone Working Policy.

The Board **APPROVED** the reviewed Lone Working Policy, subject to amending paragraph 3.1 to read "This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Board's Health and Safety Policy and using the Highland Council's Policy and Guidance on Risk Assessment and its Policy and Guidance on Preventing Violence at Work as guidance, pending revised draft Board policies on these issues being brought to the Board in early course, for adoption."

ii. Adverse Weather Guidance **Stiùireadh ri Linn Droch Shìd**

There had been circulated Report No VAL27/14 dated 4 November 2014 comprising reviewed Adverse Weather Guidance.

The Board **APPROVED** the reviewed Adverse Weather Guidance.

11. Dates of Meetings 2015 **Cinn-latha Choinneamhan 2015**

The Board **AGREED** the following meeting dates and locations for 2015:

Wednesday, 28 January 2015 (Inverness)

Thursday, 21 May 2015 (Stornoway)
Thursday, 17 September 2015 (Inverness)
Thursday, 26 November 2015 (Inverness)

The meeting closed at 11.50 a.m.
