

# HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

11 May 2015

Agenda Item	5
Report No	VAL/10/15

## Departmental Report

### Report by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer

#### Summary

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

#### 1. General

The main business of the department since the last meeting has been the continued efforts relating to the introduction of Electoral Registration and in particular preparations for the UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE). There have been two sittings of the Valuation Appeal Committee, both in respect of 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

Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was introduced on 19 September and we continue within what is termed the transitional phase. In November all electors were written to either confirming their registration where their details matched with records held by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) or asking them to provide confirmation of their identity where no such match was possible. Household enquiry forms were also sent to selected properties. The return rate for these forms was poor when compared with experience from previous annual canvasses. Reminders were issued where there was no response and a doorstep canvass of non-responders was completed. 28 canvassers were employed for the Highland area and 6 for the Western Isles.

The revised register was published on 27 February as required by law.

There have been continuing issues relating to the performance of the IER software. While a marked improvement was brought about by transferring the system to a server with higher performance, the processes are still running slowly and this has compromised the staff's ability to carry out their tasks efficiently.

The processes required to provide the necessary environment for the General Election were completed successfully, however this was only achieved through staff working an extraordinary number of additional hours of overtime along with assistance from technical staff in the organisation. Although it has always been the

case that some overtime working is necessary at the conclusion of a canvass and in the lead up to a general election, the additional hours required in this instance was exceptional.

Electoral IT system performance therefore remains as a serious issue which must be addressed.

The processes required for individual electoral registration are significantly more complex than under the previous regime, particularly so during this transitional phase. In all of these very difficult circumstances I am pleased to report that the number of clerical errors that required correction in the lead up to the poll remained low.

A by-election took place in Ward 9 in the Western Isles in March and all necessary materials were supplied to the Returning Officer. Another by election took place in ward 19, Nairn on the same day as the General Election and this also passed satisfactorily from the Electoral registration Officer's perspective.

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

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

Two valuation appeal hearings were held in March and this dealt with the bulk of cases requiring to be heard at that time. Another hearing is scheduled for 20 May for non-domestic subjects and together with a further hearing in the autumn this should ensure that there is little backlog of outstanding appeals and that all statutory timetables are adhered to.

A number of cases are due to be cited for hearing by the Lands Tribunal and detailed timetabling of these appeals is awaited.

The only outstanding appeal to the Lands Valuation Appeal Court was heard on 3 February.

The next phase of work for the valuation sections relates to the 2017 Revaluation. The target date for the Revaluation is 1 April 2015 and initial efforts shall relate to ensuring that all available rental and cost information is properly gathered and analysed. Work in connection with the revaluation shall continue to intensify as the year progresses. A detailed plan for the execution of that task shall be defined over the forthcoming weeks.

### **4. Council Tax**

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues as routine. The general level of activity remains comparatively low. The number of new houses being constructed remains at modest levels overall and there are low levels of appeal. Two appeal hearings were held in March and another is scheduled for June of this year. It is

expected that there will have been some decline in performance due to the transfer of resources to electoral duties in the lead up to the UKPGE.

## **5. Administration**

Work continues regarding the review of administrative policies and other issues of corporate governance.

A number of new or updated policies have been prepared for approval of the Board and these policies are largely based on Highland Council examples.

Following the filling of vacancies within the central admin team a reappraisal of duties and responsibilities has been carried out and the necessary training continues to ensure that there is as full a backup capability as possible.

The in house capabilities in relation to IS management have been adversely effected by sickness absence and back up is being sourced from external providers where cover is not available.

In the forthcoming weeks a reflection on performance for the UKPGE shall be carried out and plans shall be honed for the implementation of the 2015 Electoral Canvass.

## **6. Staffing**

The temporary electoral assistants are currently being continued in post on a monthly basis.

Advertisements were placed for two valuers posts, however as the level of interest was limited these posts have been re-advertised. A vacancy for a senior clerical assistant is also currently in the recruitment process following internal advertising.

## **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: 11 May 2015

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