

# HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

17 September 2015

Agenda Item	11
Report No	VAL/22/15

## 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 Individual Electoral Registration. The current focus is that of the household canvass and changes to legislation allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the Scottish Government Elections. There have been two sittings of the Valuation Appeal Committee, one in respect of Council Tax and the other for non-domestic subjects. 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 2014 and we continue within what is termed the transitional phase. The government has flagged their intention to end the period of transition at the end of December, however this is subject to parliamentary approval. The main consequence of the end to transition will be that any electors that have not been confirmed at that stage shall be deleted from the register and would need to reapply individually providing personal identifying information. There are currently 6335 electors in this category, but this number is reducing and it is to be hoped that the autumn's canvass shall reduce this number further. The franchise has been extended to 16 and 17 year olds for the forthcoming Scottish Parliamentary Election. Young voters should be declared on the household enquiry form and this information shall be supplemented by information received from the Education Authorities. The Electoral Commission are promoting registration through the schools. In addition a promotional event has been arranged by the Scottish Parliament in conjunction with the Scottish Political and Cultural Partnership for young people in Inverness on 3 October and ERO staff shall attend.

The current canvass offers the opportunity for residents of Highland and Western Isles to carry out some aspects of a canvass return by way of telephone, internet or

text messaging. Approximately 10000 returns have been received thus far by these methods together with over 61000 paper returns. In total this represents around a 53% return prior to issuing the first reminder.

A total of 49 canvassers have been recruited and this should ensure that our obligation to follow up non responding households and individuals with a doorstep visit is fulfilled.

Another novelty since the introduction of IER has been the ability for voters to register online via a Government website. Although this has presented some challenges as no facility exists for an elector to establish whether they are already registered, overall the system is easy to use and provides an alternative means for the elector to engage with democracy.

The IER software continues to provide cause for concern and consideration is being given to options that may exist to improve the capabilities of the electoral management system and the user experience.

There are currently two by-elections pending. One of these is scheduled for Ward 9, Western Isles, An Taobh Siar Agus Nis on 7 October 2015 and the other for Ward 13, Highland, Aird & Loch Ness on 8 October 2015.

The revised register will be published on 1 December 2015.

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

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

A valuation appeal hearing was held in May and a further hearing is scheduled for September. These hearings should ensure that statutory disposal schedules are complied with and there is no significant backlog of appeals as we approach the end of the calendar year.

There remain a number of cases that await citing for hearing by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland.

We have now embarked on the process of preparation for the 2017 Revaluation. The first bulk issues of property enquiry forms have been issued and we have started to analyse the returned information. A detailed plan for the execution of the revaluation has been drafted and the valuation sections will be immersed in this process throughout the autumn and winter with work continuing into next year and beyond.

### **4. Council Tax**

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues as routine and the general level of activity remains comparatively low. The number of new houses being constructed is at modest levels and there are low levels of appeal. A valuation appeal hearing was held in June of this year and a further hearing is scheduled for November. There

has, as expected, been some decline in performance due to the transfer of resources from council tax to electoral duties in the lead up to the United Kingdom Parliamentary Election.

## **5. Administration**

Work continues regarding the review of administrative policies and other issues of corporate governance although the extremely high levels of activity experienced in the field of electoral registration and the necessary involvement of senior and administrative staff has impacted on the capacity to complete this process in accordance with the intended schedule.

While work continues on a number of policies, an updated policy on Flexible Retirement has been prepared for approval.

The Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 imposes a responsibility for the Board to submit a Records Management Plan to the Keeper of the Records of Scotland. The Board has been notified that a records management plan must be submitted by 31 December 2015 and a draft plan shall be submitted to the Board in November.

The central admin team training program is also ongoing and as a consequence capability is improving, however staff sickness within central admin and the management team has impacted on capacity over the last few months.

## **6. Staffing**

Two temporary electoral assistants have had their contracts terminated and the remainder are currently being continued in post on a monthly basis.

A vacancy for a senior clerical assistant has now been filled internally and the consequent vacancy is in the process of being recruited in tandem with one other vacancy for a clerical assistant.

Two vacancies for valuers have now been filled.

Previously electoral canvassers have been employed on a three month temporary basis. We are currently investigating the possibility of changing this approach and appointing canvassers on casual contracts which would allow their use as a demand led resource throughout the year.

The Highland Council has announced that it shall no longer be routinely closing their offices between Christmas and New Year, although there may be some exceptions. It is proposed that the Board should follow their existing practice as opening offices during this period would provide little benefit in terms of service delivery and is not likely to be fully productive due to the demand for leave during the period.

## 7. Premises

During a visit to the Stornoway Offices by Board Members in May, Members were made aware of issues relating to poor winter comfort levels. Following discussions with the landlord, it has been agreed that the heating system shall be upgraded and secondary double glazing shall be installed. The landlord is undertaking this work at his expense.

## 8. Recommendation

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

Designation: Assessor and ERO

Date: 8 September 2015

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