

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

26 November 2015

Agenda Item	6.
Report No	VAL/28/15

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 and preparation for the 2017 Revaluation. There have been three sittings of the Valuation Appeal Committee, one in respect of Council Tax and two 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. The transitional phase is now set to end at the end of the calendar year at which time, any electors who have not been confirmed and who have failed to respond to an invitation to register must be removed from the Electoral Register. There are now currently 5336 electors in this category, which is down from 6335 in September. It is to be hoped that by the end of the canvass period the number will have reduced further. Work continues to ensure that those who shall be 16 or 17 at the time of the Scottish Parliamentary Election are properly registered. A number of promotional events targeted at young people were arranged by the Scottish Parliament and the Electoral Commission, These took the form of a "Battle of the Bands". The ERO engaged directly with the promotion of the Inverness event which was one of the better attended venues.

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 13300 returns have been received thus far by these methods together with over 80000 paper returns. In total this represents around a 68% return prior to doorstep canvass. While the return by electronic means is encouraging, the overall return rate is disappointing for this stage in the canvass.

The consequence of the poor return is that a significantly higher number of doorstep visits will require to be made.

A total of 49 canvassers have been recruited and are embarking on the visits necessary to fulfil the statutory obligation to follow up non responding households and individuals with a doorstep visit.

While the performance of the IER software has improved, concerns remain and options that may offer an improved user experience are being investigated.

Two by-elections have taken place, one in Ward 9, Western Isles, An Taobh Siar Agus Nis on 7 October 2015 and the other in Ward 13, Highland, Aird & Loch Ness on 8 October 2015. Both of these passed satisfactorily from the perspective of the ERO with no clerical errors.

The revised register is currently scheduled to be published on 1 December 2015, however an option to delay publication exists due to by-elections taking place during the canvass period.

3. Valuation for Rating

The period since the Board meeting in September has largely involved the continued maintenance of the valuation roll, appeal clearance and preparation for the 2017 Revaluation.

A valuation appeal hearing was held in September and a further hearing was scheduled for November. The final hearing of the year shall be in December. These hearings should ensure that all statutory disposal schedules are complied with and there is no significant backlog of appeals. All appeals that must be disposed of by the end of the calendar year have now been cleared.

There remain a small 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 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 remains at modest levels and there are low levels of appeal. A valuation appeal hearing was held in November which leaves only a very small number of appeals outstanding. Technical staff continue to be diverted as necessary to assist with electoral registration matters, which may have a continued adverse effect on time related performance.

5. Administration

The review of administrative policies and other issues relating to corporate governance continues to be compromised due to the high level of activity experienced in the field of electoral registration and the necessary involvement of senior and administrative staff. While progress continues, the pace of progress is less than ideal. This work has been further hampered by significant sick leave in the central administration team.

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 Records Management Policy is submitted to the Board for approval. This policy shall enable the completion of a records management plan for submission.

6. Staffing

All temporary clerical assistant contracts have now been terminated, however two of the temporary staff have been appointed to fill vacancies in the Inverness and Dingwall offices as fulltime clerical assistants.

Sickness absence is providing some cause for concern. While the number of separate cases is low, the impact can be significant in a small organisation. The matter is being addressed on an individual basis in close cooperation with our personnel advisors.

7. Premises

Agreement has now been reached in relation to the leasing terms of the Board's Inverness offices in accordance with the recommendation approved by the Board at the last meeting.

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: 16 November 2015

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