

# HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

10 June 2016

Agenda Item	8
Report No	VAL/11/16

## 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 related to Electoral Registration and preparation for the 2017 Revaluation. There have been two sittings of the Valuation Appeal Committee, meanwhile 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 transitional phase of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) ended at 31 December 2015. As a consequence 4986 electors, who had not confirmed their registration, were deleted from the Electoral Register as required by law. The number of deletions included electors who were no longer resident at the address. A number of those electors who continued to be resident but had failed to complete the required confirmation process have now take action to register individually and have their names added back to the register.

The Scottish Parliamentary Election was held on 5 May. There were no major issues and the election may be considered a success from the electoral registration perspective. While a small number of citizens complained on the day that they were unable to vote due to being removed from the register as a consequence of the process explained above, there was general acceptance of the situation once it was indicated to them the number of requests that had been made by the ERO that they had failed to respond to. Once again the staff carried out their duties in a professional manner with a dedication which frequently exceeded reasonable expectation.

Since the last meeting of the Board it was announced that the European Referendum would take place on 23 June. A June date had been identified as highly likely and planning had been proceeding on that basis. The timing of the referendum obviously places additional pressures on the organisation given that it follows so swiftly on the back of the Scottish Parliamentary Election. This leaves

little time for staff to take stock, indeed there was an overlap in terms of significant dates, however it may be hoped that this will, at least in part, be offset by electors having their voting arrangements in place as a consequence of the Scottish Parliamentary Election. Meanwhile, work continues to ensure that eligible electors are registered in advance of the last date for registration in time for the referendum on 23 June. A particular characteristic of this referendum appears to be an increased level of interest from overseas electors.

Work has commenced in preparation for the annual canvass that is scheduled to take place in the second half of this year. The response to the canvass last year was disappointing and resulted in a requirement for a higher number of reminders to be issued together with a requirement for a very large number of doorstep visits, both of which have very significant cost implications for the Board. It is intended to review the approach to this year's canvass to manage that situation. Localities where a particularly poor rate of return can be identified shall be prioritised and these localities shall be doorstep canvassed from the outset. This shall allow a longer doorstep canvassing period. It is also intended to post out all reminders rather than follow the previous policy of hand delivering the final reminder. Finally, an attempt shall be made to recruit additional canvassers.

Public engagement continues with direct approaches being made to particular sections of the electorate and representative bodies where the potential for under registration can be identified.

While the performance of the IER software has improved, concerns remain and options that may offer an improved user experience are being investigated. Discussions have taken place with the Highland Council with a view to determining what, if any, infrastructure plays a part in the difficulties experienced.

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

The period since the last Board meeting 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 May to clear down appeals that must be heard by the end of the calendar year. The majority of appeals were cleared by that sitting, although a small number were referred to the Lands Tribunal for hearing. There are no significant backlogs of appeals and it is fully anticipated that the remaining appeals shall be concluded in advance of the statutory disposal date of 31 December 2016.

There remain a small number of cases that shall require hearing by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland if a resolution cannot be reached. These are more specialised subjects such as nuclear, telecoms and Ministry of Defence Property.

The 2017 Revaluation is now well underway. Bulk issues of property enquiry forms have been made and a reminder process is now in train. Returned forms are being

analysed as they are received. The valuation process has started with initial attention being directed towards subjects valued on the comparative basis. Approximately 50% of subjects have been allocated draft provisional values at this stage.

#### **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, although there has been a slight increase over the previous year. There continue to be low levels of appeal. A valuation appeal hearing was held in April and remaining Council Tax appeals shall be heard in the Autumn.

#### **5. Administration**

The review of administrative policies 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. The additional requirement to embark on the non-domestic revaluation adds further pressure on available resource. While progress continues, the pace of progress remains less than ideal. The central admin team is now back to full strength and an additional temporary member has been recruited for the summer period. The situation will continue to be monitored but if the level of activity does not fall, serious consideration must be given to increasing resources within the section.

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 records management plan was submitted as required before 31 December 2015 and as anticipated initial feedback has now been received. A response must now be submitted for approval by 17 June. In particular this response shall require input from the constituent councils' archivists with whom we are in dialogue. It is then expected that a plan will be approved that shall take account of the current position with agreed development to take place in a future period. The full implementation of the plan and its implications shall require to be addressed in the year ahead and beyond.

#### **6. Staffing**

There has been an improvement in sickness absence, and the situation continues to be monitored. It was reported previously that the central administration section was particularly badly affected by sickness absence. This has now been resolved but workloads remain an issue.

Mr Charles Peacock has intimated his intention to retire from his post as a senior technical assistant in the Inverness office on 2 September after 40 years service. I wish to record my thanks to Charles for his dedicated service to the Board over the period.

## **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: 31 May 2016

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