

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

15 September 2016

Agenda Item	10
Report No	VAL/21/16

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 continues to be Electoral Registration and preparation for the 2017 Revaluation. There has been one sitting 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

During the period since the last meeting of the Board there has been one major electoral event, which was the referendum on continued membership of the European Union.

The proximity of this referendum to the Scottish Parliamentary Election imposed an overlap in terms of the electoral timetable with some consequential overlapping procedures. There was also an extension to the registration deadline which was introduced at the eleventh hour, due to a failure of the national web registration portal. Notwithstanding these issues, the referendum passed off successfully from the Electoral Registration Officer's perspective with very few clerical error corrections.

The annual electoral canvass is now underway. Household Enquiry Forms were issued to all households on 15 August and the responses are being processed. The first reminder is scheduled to be issued on 12 September. 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. The position this year is much improved. The return rate currently stands at 53% and this is more in line with returns that were achieved prior to the introduction of individual electoral registration. Further encouragement can be found in the use that has been made by the public of interactive voter registration (IVR). IVR is a system which allows a response to the household enquiry form

(HEF) via a dedicated web portal or by text or phone rather than post. Text or phone can only be used where there is no change to the existing registration details of the household, but changes can be noted via the web portal. So far 20,893 responses have been made using IVR whereas only 13,534 were made using that method last year. Each response made using IVR as opposed to a postal response saves the Board between 20p and 26p. If staffing costs were factored in, the saving is even greater.

The doorstep canvass will start shortly and this will initially target parliamentary polling districts where there was less than a 60% response last year. In addition we are piloting the use of tablets to assess whether these devices can improve efficiency in future years.

Public engagement will continue 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 continue to be investigated. Further discussions have been scheduled with the Highland Council with a view to determining what, if any, infrastructure plays a part in the difficulties experienced.

There will be a by-election held in Ward 18 – Culloden and Ardersier on Thursday 6 October 2016 and preparatory work is in hand.

There is added as an appendix to this report a table containing details of additional funding received from government for electoral registration since 2013.

3. Valuation for Rating

The period since the last Board meeting has largely involved preparation for the 2017 Revaluation.

Most enquiry forms have now been issued and responses received. This area of work has also seen a disappointing return of information from particular sectors and this leads to both valuation difficulties and additional unnecessary costs for the Board.

The valuation process is well underway and we are working to a position where draft valuations will have been determined for most subjects by the end of this month. Values will then continue to be checked and honed during the autumn and early winter.

To date there has been no overtime allocated to this work, however it is envisaged that some overtime shall be necessary during this month.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues as routine and the general level of activity remains comparatively low. A valuation appeal hearing was held in August.

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 related to the non-domestic revaluation continues to add further pressure on available resource. While progress continues, the pace of progress remains less than ideal.

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. A records management plan has now been approved that takes into account the current position and contains agreed development that shall make improvements over future years. The resource implications of this plan shall be reported at a future meeting of the Board.

6. Staffing

There has an improvement in sickness absence, and the situation continues to be monitored.

Mr George Peebles has intimated his intention to resign from his post as a Senior Technical Assistant in the Dingwall Office on 9 September after almost 34 years' service. George is leaving to take up a post with Grampian Assessor. I wish to record my thanks to George for his dedicated service to the Board over the period.

7. Recommendation

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

Designation: Assessor and ERO

Date: 6 September 2016

Author: William J Gillies, Assessor & ERO

ADDITIONAL GRANT FUNDING FOR ELECTORAL PURPOSES

ELECTORAL FUNDING - UK AND SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT GRANTS		
UK Government	Date of notification	Amount allocated
Funding allocation for move to IER 2013/14	26/03/2013	£ 10,354.09
IER 2014/15 indicative funding allocation	31/03/2014	£ 126,976.00
IER Justification led grant 2014/15	19/03/2014	£ 15,000.00
Maximising Registration 2 2014/15	06/02/2014	£ 12,660.50
IER A3 forms and processing	31/03/2014	£ 7,047.00
IER capital hardware payment	30/05/2014	£ 25,910.40
IER Maximising Registration Household Notification letter	09/01/2015	£ 17,349.54
IER Justification led grant 2015/16	09/03/2016	£ 150,000.00
IER 2015/16 indicative funding allocation	24/04/2015	£ 80,071.00
IER core funding 2016/17	25/07/2016	£ 156,820.00
EU Referendum extension to registration deadline funding allocation	11/08/2016	£ 24,760.98
TOTAL UK GOVERNMENT FUNDING		£ 626,949.51
Scottish Government		
Scottish Independence Referendum - printing, reminders and processing	16/12/2013	£ 6,099.64
Scottish Independence Referendum extraordinary expenditure	24/02/2015	£ 46,507.00
Lowering the voting age for Scottish Parliament and local government elections	14/03/2015	£ 12,338.00
TOTAL SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT FUNDING		£ 64,944.64