

# HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

30 November 2016

Agenda Item	7
Report No	VAL/27/16

## 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 of the Board has been the continued preparation for the 2017 Revaluation and completion of the 2016 electoral canvass. 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 the first phase of the annual canvass has been concluded.

Household enquiry forms were issued to all households on 15 August, with reminders on 12 September and 10 October. The final responses are now being processed prior to closure of the register for publication. The response to the canvass last year was very 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 81.4% and while not as good as that of pre IER levels, it is a significant improvement on last year. Interactive voter registration (IVR) has proved more popular with the electorate this year, with 31328 or 23% choosing to respond in this manner. This compares with 13534 or less than 10% last year. 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 and consequently saves money both in terms of postages and staff processing time.

The doorstep canvass is now well underway. The initial doorstep canvass targeted areas where historically there has been a poor response and has now moved on to a general canvass of non-responding households. It is anticipated that around 30000 doorstep visits shall be required in total. This next phase of doorstep

canvassing is ongoing and the use of tablet devices is being piloted in chosen locations. Initial indications are that in suitable cases, these devices can help to provide a more efficient approach to doorstep canvassing. They allow real time update of information between the canvasser and the office, saving on data handling and unnecessary visits. This approach shall be fully appraised at the completion of the canvass period and may provide justification for further investment in this technology in suitable circumstances where the cost of the hardware and software can be justified.

The network links between the Board's offices have been refreshed as part of the roll out of the "SWAN" project, although no obvious improvement in performance has been reported. Discussion shall continue through Highland Council IS Client to monitor and measure both network and server performance, both of which appear to be limiting the overall performance of our systems with the inherent cost in staff time that is related to sub optimum performance.

A by-election was held in Ward 18 – Culloden and Ardersier on Thursday 6 October 2016 and this passed satisfactorily from an electoral registration perspective.

The arrangements for bulk printing of registration materials shall require review as a consequence of the changes to the Highland Council Information Systems contracts due to take place at the end of the financial year.

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

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

The initial valuation process is largely complete with draft valuations in place for most subjects. Values are now being checked, honed and finalised. A final attempt is being made to ensure that all available evidence has been ingathered and analysed so that the best possible reliance can be placed on schemes of valuation. This process shall involve the use of statutory powers to attain important valuation evidence.

Two major pieces of work shall continue throughout the winter and shall require significant resource. These involve the valuation of shootings and deer forests which have been reintroduced into the valuation roll as part of the Land Reform Act, and work associated with the implications of a UK Supreme Court decision relating to the unit of valuation.

It is over twenty years since shootings were removed from the valuation roll and consequently a complete refresh of information is required. As part of that process, over 6000 enquiry forms are being issued in Highland and Western Isles to estates and agricultural holdings. This information together with information from other sources shall then be analysed to determine entries in the valuation roll and their associated value.

To date the 2017 Revaluation has been carried out with very little overtime when compared with previous years, although it is anticipated that the remaining additional tasks mentioned above will involve some overtime working.

#### **4. Council Tax**

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues as routine and the general level of activity remains comparatively low.

#### **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 non-domestic revaluation has also had an impact. While progress continues, the pace of progress remains less than ideal although it is anticipated that some additional resource shall become available in the months ahead. However, the need to monitor and review existing policies will continue and an analysis of the future resource requirement of the central admin section requires to be considered.

#### **6. Staffing**

Mr Christopher Holmes, a Graduate Trainee Valuer has intimated his intention to resign from his post in the Inverness Office. It is intended to advertise for a replacement shortly. There are currently two recent vacancies in the technical sections and these posts are being considered against future needs.

#### **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: 21 November 2016

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