

**AGENDA ITEM 12**

**REPORT NO. VAL/10/17**

Highland & Western Isles Valuation Joint Board

# DRAFT Equalities Mainstreaming and Equalities Outcomes Report – June 2017

27 June 2017

Document Control

Document last saved: 6 June 2017

Version	Changes	Author	Date
1.0	First release	M Thomson	6/06/17

## **EQUALITIES MAINSTREAMING AND EQUALITIES OUTCOMES PROGRESS REPORT – JUNE 2017**

In March 2013 the Highland & Western Isles Valuation Joint Board published its Equalities Mainstreaming and Equalities Outcomes report, which was updated in October 2014.

The report noted the Board's strategic position and outcomes which were summed up as follows:

- So far as the electoral registration function is concerned, the period from the start of 2013 through to the summer of 2015 is taken up with great change in the registration regime allied to three major polls – the European election, the Scottish Referendum and the UK General election. The change from household to individual electoral registration is a fundamental one and is seen as a prime focus for attention in the equalities field given the particular characteristics of the change of regime and the known difficulties affecting the relevant groups
- Rating – the rating revaluation due to be held in 2015 will now take place in 2017. This means that the bulk of the preparatory work will take place in 2014 – 2016 as the valuations will require to be finalised by the end of the summer in 2016
- The Council Tax regime is currently a stable function, however the Scottish Government has indicated that they are reviewing its future and it is possible that it will be replaced following the next Scottish Government election in 2016
- So far as the Board's role as an employer is concerned, during a time of severe restraint in public expenditure, it seems unlikely that other than in short term arrangements to deal with the introduction of individual electoral registration (IER), there is likely to be any expansion of the staff compliment and turnover in staff is likely to be low other than that engendered by retirements. Given these circumstances there is likely to be limited scope to affect change through the recruitment channel.

Against that background and recognising that the rating and council tax function are largely property based, it seems clear that the main focus in the next two years requires to be in the electoral registration field.

This is not to suggest that when it comes to service delivery, there are no issues which can arise in the rating and council tax areas. These however are less likely, less obvious and plausibly may well be of a similar character as those that arise in the electoral field.

The Board's obligations as an employer must also assume a prominent position.

Accordingly the following outcomes were proposed:

## **Outcome One**

### **People feel involved and are able to participate in public life and influence decision-making**

This outcome shall be supported by:

- The existence of a comprehensive publicity plan supporting participation
- Integration of the equalities element with the Electoral Commission performance standards regime
- Engagement with individual equalities groups to ensure removal of barriers to registration as the IER regime enters its transitional phase
- Ensure all property that should be taxed is included in the valuation roll and council tax list.

This will require a number of measures to track progress which are provisionally as follows:

- Number on the register relative to population estimates and census outputs
- Number of responders to household and individual canvass as a proportion of the total number of households
- Number of corrections and complaints
- Feedback from survey of equalities groups
- Reports by auditors

## **Outcome Two**

### **We will improve customer satisfaction rates in particular from people with protected characteristics**

The following steps shall support this outcome:

- Focus on improved materials using straightforward language tested with relevant groups in partnership with other EROs and the Electoral Commission
- Improved communication with particular target groups through engagement with individual equalities groups and other agencies representing those with protected characteristics and seeking to remove barriers to registration
- Develop public engagement strategy

In order to track this outcome the following will be examined:

- Public performance survey via random sampling of transactions with the department
- We will monitor performance more generally via partners' survey work, such as Electoral Commission and Highland Council research and reports by representative groups
- Number of complaints
- Analysis of the number of electoral errors that come to light

## **Outcome Three**

### **Increase the proportion of staff and job applicants who feel they are treated fairly, particularly those with protected characteristics**

The Board is a relatively small organisation with low staff turnover which limits the capacity to address any imbalance in the workforce. As part of this exercise it is acknowledged that younger people, particularly those under the age of 30, are under-represented.

This outcome shall be supported by the following:

- A systematic review of employment policies to ensure fair and equal conditions and opportunities
- Promotion of work experience opportunities
- Increased training in equalities matters for staff at each of the departments offices
- Increased commitment to training where there is an identified need for the organisation to improve the skills of staff
- Reduction in occupational segregation where this contributes to an equal pay gap and generally seek to reduce the gender pay gap
- Review of recruitment channels to improve access to opportunities
- Promote full use of flexible working and maternity and related arrangements
- Promote career progression schemes

In order to track this outcome we shall require the following:

- A periodic staff survey to monitor and record staff opinions, perceptions and satisfaction
- Analysis of employment data and recruitment monitoring statistics
- Assessment of equalities monitoring statistics

Adopting these outcomes will require that a revised Equalities Plan be prepared that sets out in greater detail the steps that will require to be taken to advance towards these outcomes. It may also be necessary to modify some of the measures that are proposed. This is particularly so in the electoral field where the intention to integrate some of this work with the Electoral Commission will give rise to the opportunity to merge statistical requirements when the Commission guidance on individual electoral registration is published.

## **Progress to date**

Since its publication of the report in March 2013 the Valuation Joint Board has seen changes within its senior management team. A new Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer was appointed in October 2013 which subsequently resulted in a senior management team restructure in the summer of 2014.

Due to this restructure progress on the outcomes was limited between the end of 2013 until new appointments were made in September 2014. Since this period

however much work has been carried out on all of the outcomes identified especially around electoral registration.

Individual electoral registration replaced the previous household system in Scotland on 19 September 2014. The new system means that responsibility to register falls to each individual instead of the head of the household notifying the Electoral Registration Officer who is resident in a property. Individuals now have the opportunity to register online via the government digital service with their details being verified against records held by the Department of Works and Pensions.

Bulk preparatory work for the 2017 revaluation will commence in April 2015 with work completed by the end of September 2016.

Since the Board published its Equalities Mainstreaming and Equalities Outcomes Progress Report in March 2015 (updated May 2015) the following has been achieved in terms of the outcomes set:

### **Outcome One**

#### **People feel involved and are able to participate in public life and influence decision-making**

- Work on a public engagement strategy commenced in November 2014 and is regularly reviewed to:
  - refine the picture of the demographics of the Highland and Western Isles electoral areas
  - confirm the key challenges for engaging with residents
  - reflect lessons learnt from work already undertaken to maximise registration
  - identify priority areas and specifically target particular groups and/or areas in order to maximise registration for those who are eligible

This has seen the distribution of posters and information leaflets to a number of organisations including secondary schools, libraries, community centres, leisure centres, service points and solicitors/housing associations to name but a few.

Adverts have been placed in community magazines and through the Highland Council's social media outlets, press releases, internal and external magazines, NHS Highland and other large employers in the area.

- 2015 saw the introduction of the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill which allowed 16 and 17 year olds to vote at local government elections and Scottish Parliament elections from 5 May 2016. This change in legislation now allows for the addition of 14 and 15 year olds to the electoral register.

Partnership working has been carried out with the Electoral Commission, secondary schools and Looked after Children establishments to encourage registration of the 14 – 17 year age group.

Further work on the engagement of students and young persons has still to be carried out along with individual equalities groups to ensure removal of barriers to registration and this work will be focused on during the annual canvass of electors in the autumn of 2017 and 2018.

The newly published register of electors on 1 December 2016 showed an increase from 2015 of over 5,000 electors.

- Some equalities related training has been carried out by the Office & Support Manager in 2016 and early 2017:

1. Equal Opportunity and Diversity – Highland Council
2. Public Sector Equality Duty – Highland Council

Electoral registration staff will continue to carry out training as and when courses are available.

- Posters have been displayed at area offices in Inverness, Wick and Dingwall advising all customers that interpretation services are available via the lead authority, Highland Council identified providers for face-to-face interpretation services. Interpretation services are available from Global Language Services or from the Highland Council's Customer Service team who provide communication support for those who are deaf, deafened, deafblind or hard of hearing.

A British Sign Language video on services available from the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer is available via the Youtube link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/TheHighlandCouncil>

- Translation services are available through Language Line for telephone translations for any customer whose first language is not English. Information on how to access the service has been made available to all reception staff with laminated language identification leaflets available at all reception areas.
- Through best value, completion certificates and building warrant lists are utilised to ensure properties that should be taxed are included in the valuation roll and council tax lists.
- The Valuation Joint Board has a very low level of clerical errors and despite workload pressures in the lead up to the EU Referendum there were only a total of 5 clerical errors in Highland. The Scottish Parliamentary election and Scottish Local Government Election resulted in no clerical errors for both authorities.
- In April 2013 a new complaints handling procedure was implemented with two guides being issued to staff, Complaints Handling Procedure – internal document and Employees Guide to the Complaints Handling Procedures.

The Valuation Joint Board has a very low number of complaints each year with 5 formal complaints being received between March 2015 to March 2017.

The complaints procedure is regularly reviewed.

- Feedback survey from equalities groups has not been carried out to date but will be progressed once all work has been completed on the public engagement strategy between autumn 2017 and autumn 2018.
- A timetable has been created to look at updating all policies and procedures currently held by the Board and this programme will be completed by the end of 2017. As part of this work a revised Equal Opportunities Policy was approved by Members of the Valuation Joint Board in June 2016.
- We have had no adverse feedback from auditors.

## **Outcome Two**

### **We will improve customer satisfaction rates in particular from people with protected characteristics**

With the introduction of individual electoral registration, a large number of forms and letters have been produced which are based on user testing by the Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission. All publicity materials used for the public engagement strategy for elections have been produced by the Electoral Commission.

The following progress has been made to date:

- Where possible the Valuation Joint Board uses plain English in its communications but all letters will be evaluated by the end of 2017 to ensure best practice as part of Highland Council's corporate membership of the Plain English Campaign.
- Work on improved communication with particular target groups through engagement with individual equalities groups has still to commence but will be carried out as part of the public engagement strategy in 2017.
- The Valuation Joint Board have trialled the use of tablets to carry out doorstep canvassing which allows real time information on potential new electors to be passed back to electoral staff. Whilst the trials have gone well during 2016 work remains to be carried out with care homes.
- Our website has been updated to include links to the UK Government's register to vote website to allow individuals easier access to register to vote. We have also included a link to the Electoral Commission's website to provide voting guidance such as large print, Braille and easy read alternative formats.



- Each of our area offices displays “Have your say about our service” questionnaires in reception areas for members of the public to complete. Most of the forms received are compliments about the service customers have received from employees of the Board. If any issues are raised these are flagged to the Office & Support Manager to investigate and take any necessary remedial action. It is proposed to create a feedback questionnaire for any survey work undertaken by technical or valuation staff.
- Since the autumn of 2015 we have used interactive voter registration (IVR) which allows households to respond to the annual canvass household enquiry forms via internet, SMS, text or in paper format. As part of IVR households who complete their enquiry form through the internet are given the opportunity to complete a feedback questionnaire on their experience. During the 2016 canvass feedback covered the following areas:
  - Is this your first experience of using internet registration?
  - How would you rate the Household Enquiry Response website in terms of use?
  - What reason(s) did you have for choosing to respond/register to vote online?
  - How satisfied are you with the overall service you receive from your Electoral Services Team?
  - Currently, the government requires us to send letters to all homes every year regarding registering to vote. This is a costly and time consuming exercise. If the rules changed, and we were allowed to contact households via electronic methods, how interested would you be in being asked to register each year by email or SMS (text message)?
  - Would you like to see technology used more in elections, providing innovative and more convenient ways in which you can cast your vote?
  - Gender?
  - Age group?
  - Ethnic group?

Electors are given the opportunity to provide further comments about the overall experience of responding to the Household Enquiry Form or registering to vote. Feedback is analysed prior to the following year’s annual canvass.

The feedback supplied from our electoral management system provider allows us to monitor our responses against the percentage of returns for all sites using the survey across the country.

- Monitoring of performance is carried out by Performance Standards for Electoral Registration Officers which are completed and submitted each year to the Electoral Commission. Since November 2012 the outcomes have been included as part of the Annual Report which is published at the end of each year. Work still has to be carried out with Highland Council on research and reports from representative groups and this will be targeted towards the end of 2017.

## **Outcome Three**

### **Increase the proportion of staff and job applicants who feel they are treated fairly, particularly those with protected characteristics**

The Board has seen a very low turnover of staff since the publication of the report in 2013.

The following work has been or is being undertaken:

- A timetable has been produced to update employment and health & safety policies and procedures. Work is hoped to be completed by the end of 2017 on updating all policies and procedures.
- The Board will review work experience opportunities and the under-representation of younger people particularly those under the age of 30.
- In June 2015 an employee review and development plan was introduced for staff. This will be an annual review carried out by line managers and will focus on health, safety and wellbeing, workloads and performance, skills and development and communication where employees will be given the opportunity to seek any additional training relevant to their role and to highlight any underutilised skills that they may have. A stress map will be introduced as part of the employee review and development plan process.
- Reduction in occupational segregation – whilst there has been a reduction in the gender pay gap across male and female employees, the Board is still working to reduce the ratio of male/female employees. As an employer turnover in staff is low other than that engendered by retirements.
- Maternity leave and paternity leave arrangements are in place across the Board with advice for staff being constantly monitored. Flexible working has been in place for a number of years with a larger number of staff now taking advantage of flexible working arrangements such as reduction in hours worked, flexible working patterns and homeworking. Flexible retirement has also been reduced across the Board.
- The Valuation Joint Board promotes career progression schemes and currently has three members of staff on a career progression scheme.
- A staff satisfaction survey is to be issued to all staff in winter 2017 with results co-ordinated by the Office & Support Manager.
- Work on analysis of employment data, recruitment monitoring statistics and equalities monitoring statistics has still to be carried out.
- A number of HR related training courses have been undertaken in 2016 and early 2017 by the Senior Management Team:

1. Mentally Healthy Workplace – Highland Council
2. Employee Review and Development Briefings – Highland Council
3. Stress Awareness – Highland Council

Training will also be carried out in Recruitment and Selection, Attendance Management and Dealing with Conflict throughout 2017. After training in September 2017 the Office & Support Manager will take on the role of Mental Health Representative for the department. This role will involve being the first point of contact for staff with mental health difficulties and to promote mental health awareness in the workplace.

- A skills audit questionnaire was issued to admin and clerical staff in 2015 to identify training needs. A similar questionnaire will be rolled out to technical and valuation staff along with staff in the Central Administration Team by the end of 2017

### **Equal Pay Statement and Staffing Information**

Under the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012 there is a requirement to publish an equal pay statement and to publish information as to the characteristics/demographics of the Board's employees and the gender pay gap.

Under section 7(3) and 8(3) the Board has less than 150 employees since these Regulations came into force. The Board has 54 members of staff based across four offices based in Inverness, Dingwall, Wick and Stornoway.

### **Reporting**

The Board is required annually to report and publish information on equalities matters. It is intended to accommodate this requirement by including a section in the annual report that is produced each year which will draw together performance, equalities and financial information from 2017.

### **Review**

It is a requirement to review equalities practices, policies and outcomes from time to time. A suitable timeframe for review is after the publication of the 2016 register of electors prior to preparation of the Equalities Mainstreaming Report for 2017-2021.

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27 June 2017