

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

21 June 2018

Agenda Item	8
Report No	VAL/10/18

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 (ERO) since the last meeting of the Board.

1. General

The main business since the last meeting of the Board has been the end of year update of the Valuation Roll, the disposal of remaining appeals from the previous revaluation and the disposal of a significant number of 2017 revaluation appeals. Update of the electoral register has continued throughout.

2. Electoral Registration

The period since January has seen the continued update of the electoral register.

A by-election was held in Ward 11, Caol & Mallaig in April and this was carried out satisfactorily from an electoral registration perspective, with no clerical errors being reported.

Preparation is underway for the annual canvass involving the recruitment of around 60 canvassing staff, together with a review and preparation of the necessary documentation. Document testing has been carried out by the Electoral Commission with a view to improving the return rate of Household Enquiry Forms (HEF's). Some revised wording and graphics have been adopted for the covering letter with the aim of further encouraging an online return. Online returns offer a considerable resource saving.

Further investigation of options for improvement of electoral systems is under consideration. One important issue for a geographical area such as ours is the treatment of rural addressing and the reliance that any new system may have on the corporate address gazetteer. Testing in this regard is being addressed. This work package has been delayed as a consequence of complying with additional requirements introduced in May by provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

3. Valuation for Rating

Sittings of the Valuation Appeal Committee have taken place to address revaluation appeals in respect of shops, offices, workshops and small hotels. This has resulted in the disposal of around 1,750 appeals. In addition, citations have now been issued for public houses, car parks, salmon fishings and Highland Council workshops and these are due to be heard in September. Very good progress is being made at this stage.

A total of 757 appeals against the valuations for shooting rights and deer forests have now been logged. The effect of this is that while the total number of appeals received excluding shootings is less than those received at the last revaluation, once shooting appeals are added, there is a significant increase in the total number of appeals to be addressed.

The rate of appeal disposal is largely determined by the Valuation Appeal Committee who are responsible for ensuring that all appeals are disposed of in terms of the statutory timetable. These obligations should be met at the current disposal rate, although it should be acknowledged that initial disposal is likely to proceed at a faster rate, and as the complexity of the appeals under consideration increases, the time taken to deal with an appeal can also increase dramatically. The current rate of appeal disposal has proved particularly challenging for those involved and cannot be safely sustained indefinitely.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues. Cases requiring review of the valuation band following a sale continue to be addressed and this is resulting in a number of backdated notifications of band increase.

5. Administration

The review of the Central Admin section's procedures, workloads and resources that is due to be carried out by Highland Council HR has yet to be concluded. Meanwhile the pressures on the section continue to be relieved by temporary staff. Consideration has been given to the best method of allocation of work to clerical and admin staff with a view to improving support for the valuation and technical sections. It has been concluded that there should be some reallocation of workload between the clerical sections and that there should be a section based in Inverness that focuses almost entirely on the valuation processes. This should help to enable the valuation function to be carried out efficiently and effectively by ensuring that the necessary level of clerical support is provided to valuation and technical staff throughout the year.

A great deal of work has been carried out to prepare the organisation for the requirements of GDPR. This has involved, for example, increasing the number and scope of data sharing agreements, provision of privacy notices, consideration of data security and a review of policies and procedures. Much of the work has been achieved through the Scottish Assessors Association (SAA) and the guidance provided by the Governance Committee.

Two members of staff have attained GDPR Practitioner Certificates. This required 4 days of training followed by an examination and a project. It is intended that two further staff members shall complete this course in the autumn. Ten members of staff have attended a half day training course and it is intended that all remaining staff should complete the online training provided through The Highland Council.

It is a requirement of the Data Protection Act 2018 that organisations have a Data Protection Officer (DPO). The requirements of the Act and the size of this organisation has made it difficult to comply by appointing a member of staff. The solution that has been adopted through the SAA is a partnership arrangement whereby reciprocal arrangements are put in place with another Assessor. It has been agreed that Highland and Western Isles shall provide a DPO for Lanarkshire Assessor and that Lanarkshire Assessor shall provide a DPO for Highland and Western Isles. This arrangement allows for an appropriate officer in each organisation to undertake this role who has sufficient independence in terms of the Act, together with the necessary knowledge of the business processes.

6. Staffing

While staffing has been generally stable over the period, there was one very notable retiral. Rosemary Fraser, a member of the clerical staff in Dingwall retired having completed 46 years of loyal service.

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: 12 June 2018

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