

# HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

13 September 2018

Agenda Item	11
Report No	VAL/24/18

## 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 disposal of a significant number of 2017 revaluation appeals. Preparations were made for the annual canvass and the canvass is underway.

#### 2. Electoral Registration

It was decided to make an earlier start to the annual canvass with the aim of completing the Household Enquiry Form (HEF) stage at an earlier date and allow the doorstep canvass to get well underway in advance of the winter months.

While the first HEF issue took place at the beginning of July as planned the issue of the first reminders was delayed due to technical issues. These issues took the form of delays in scanning back the returned forms. The delays were caused by the generally slow network exacerbated by printing issues which had resulted in creases across the barcode area of the forms. There were also technical problems with the EMS software. While this delay was viewed at the time as being an unwelcome occurrence, it has since transpired that it may have resulted in unexpected benefits. It is normally the case that there has been around a 50% return at the point of first reminder issue. The delay resulted in a return of 65.9% with a consequential reduction in the number of reminders required. Reminders were issued on 24 August and the return rate is 74.06% at the time of writing. This experience will be considered when planning next year's canvass.

Doorstep canvassing is about to get underway and non-returning households are being targeted in the first instance.

Uptake of Interactive Voter Registration (IVR) has improved again this year. This has been encouraged by further changes to the covering letter attached to the HEF. Last year at the end of the canvass period 28.76% of returns had been made electronically. This year we have already received 30.95% electronically.

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

Sittings of the Valuation Appeal Committee have taken place to address 445 revaluation appeals in respect of workshops and 83 cases continued from previous hearings. Citations have now been issued for public houses, car parks, salmon fishings, Highland Council workshops, self-catering units, retail warehouses, guest houses, schools, surgeries bothies and deer forests. This represents a further 1468 appeals.

The rate of appeal disposal is determined by the Chairman of the Valuation Appeal Panel who is responsible for ensuring that all appeals are disposed of in terms of the statutory timetable. The rate at which appeals have been cited is placing a very high level of stress on the service and is having an impact on both staff and budget. The rate of citation is higher than in other valuation areas. It is hoped that the rate of citation will reduce to more sustainable levels in the forthcoming year. Current indications are that there will be a reduction in the number of appeals to be dealt with during the last three months of the financial year, as the hearings during that period have been reserved for continuations. This does however mean that substantive cases are liable to be heard during that period.

### **4. Council Tax**

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues. Significant progress has been made in addressing rebanding on sale and the exercise is moving towards a more acceptable position. Engagement with local solicitors is being pursued with a view to offering a rebanding advice service at the point of sale. It is hoped that this together with revised processes will improve the position for the future.

### **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 not been concluded and the pressures on the section continue to be relieved by temporary staff.

Work has been carried out drafting policies for presentation to Board meetings in September and November.

A new flexitime system has been installed and brought into use and should save staff time in the administration of flexitime and annual leave.

A new personnel system has been introduced and new contracts/amendments to contracts have been issued. Training records are also being updated and incorporated.

Assistance has been provided in support of the administration of revaluation appeals relating to shootings and deer forests.

Central admin have also planned the annual canvass and are currently managing the issue of HEFs. The process of employing canvassers is also underway.

The computing environment continues to perform poorly and recent changes appear to have exacerbated the situation. It is hoped that equipment can be refreshed as soon as possible as this situation is adversely affecting performance.

## **6. Staffing**

The staffing situation is generally stable. A technician in the Inverness office retires on 28<sup>th</sup> September after 27 years of service. There is one member of staff on maternity leave and the position is being covered by a temporary appointment. The posts of Divisional Valuer, approved at the last Board meeting, will be advertised this month.

## **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: 5 September 2018

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