

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

21 June 2019

Agenda Item	8
Report No	VAL/9/19

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 associated with the delivery of the European Parliamentary Election together with the further disposal of revaluation appeals and the maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax lists.

2. Electoral Registration

The European Election was an electoral event that was not envisaged until quite late in what would be the normal planning process. Even once formal notice had been given, government continued to imply that it may be cancelled. All of this made for a difficult planning and implementation process. The normal planning timetable was necessarily compressed.

One particular requirement of a European election is that nationals of other European states who are living in the UK and are listed on the Electoral Roll must confirm that they wish to vote in the UK at a particular European Election and not in their home state. The very short lead up to this election resulted in a very limited period for compliance in terms of the law. The ERO wrote to all European Electors giving them the opportunity to complete and return a form to comply with this requirement. This was supported by attempts to raise awareness in the press and social media. The number of electors who returned the necessary information was relatively good in national terms.

The election passed successfully from the Electoral Registration Officers perspective and there were only 6 clerical errors requiring correction.

The total number of postal voters registered was 39150.

The issue which arose previously regarding limited IT contingency in the event of network failure in the lead up to the last by-election, and was managed at that time by a number of manual contingency measures, was more properly addressed for

this election. The solution involved Wipro building a local server and a frequent back up schedule being applied. While this resulted in additional cost, it was necessary as it was not deemed to be acceptable or possible, to provide the necessary resilience for a national poll by the manual means utilised at the by-election.

3. Valuation for Rating

Update of the valuation roll was the main business in the period leading up to the end of the financial year. This task stretched our capacity to the limit given the resource that had been diverted to appeal resolution in the autumn of 2018.

Since the last meeting of the Board there have been a further 2 diets of Valuation Appeal Committee hearings.

Appeals against the valuation of around 250 shooting rights were cited for hearing in on 6 June. Over two hundred of these were settled by negotiation. The remainder were continued to allow national consideration of an issue that had arisen in relation to commercial forestry.

A further hearing is scheduled for 27 June to deal with continuations from previous hearings. Preparations for a busy schedule of appeal hearings in the late summer and autumn are also underway.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues.

Council tax appeals are being disposed of by the Valuation Appeal Committee on an ongoing basis.

5. Administration

A minor reorganisation of clerical staff is underway to set up a valuation support section. This generally involves redeployment and there is no financial impact currently associated with this action.

There has still been no improvement in the computing environment and although a network upgrade has been carried out in Moray House there is no discernible improvement in performance. The desktop environment remains critically outdated and continues to have a serious impact on departmental performance. It is regrettable that no timetable can be provided for its replacement. The seriousness of this situation and the impact of continuing delay cannot be overstated as it serves to both impact on current efficiency and compromise any drives towards greater future efficiency.

6. IT Costs

In response to a question from the Board regarding the potential for savings as a consequence of the Wipro Contract, Highland Council have advised that the Council's ICT Transformation programme will deliver significant savings to the Highland Council core ICT budget over the period of the contract with Wipro, including significant savings in FY 19/20. However, there is no commitment to savings on ICT charges for individual services provided to services by Wipro. It is further suggested that the provision of new equipment, with Windows 10 and Office 365 technology, including Skype for Business, will allow individual business units to create efficiencies through flexible working arrangements and optimisation of the new technology.

7. Staffing

The staffing situation is generally stable, although a number of members of staff have retired recently. Most recently one valuer has entered into phased retirement and another has retired.

As previously reported it is proving difficult to recruit qualified valuation staff. Since the last Board meeting a trainee valuer and a graduate valuer have been recruited. A further recruitment is underway to fill vacant posts and employ a total of three trainees as part of the "Barclay funding".

8. 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

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