

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

22 November 2019

Agenda Item	6
Report No	VAL/18/19

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 disposal of revaluation appeals, the annual electoral canvass and the maintenance of the Valuation Roll and Council Tax lists. The last two weeks have involved preparation for the General Election.

2. Electoral Registration

At the outset of the year it was thought that 2019 would be a relatively quiet year as far as elections were concerned. In late October a UK Parliamentary General Election was called for 12 December 2019 under the provisions of the Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019. Early indications are that this will be a busy electoral event and increased levels of registration and postal vote applications are being experienced. Currently around 300 applications to register are being made per day. Planning for the Election has been completed and meetings have taken place with Returning Officer's staff.

A by-election was held in Ward 14, Inverness Central. The election passed successfully from the Electoral Registration Officers perspective and there were no clerical errors.

The annual electoral canvass is nearing completion. Household enquiry forms were issued in July and subsequent reminders have been sent as necessary. A total of 139,804 properties were sent household enquiry forms and 118,246 have responded thus far. This represents a percentage return of 84.12% and is slightly poorer than at the equivalent time last year, where there was an 86.62% return. This can be explained by the fact that the doorstep canvass has been suspended as a consequence of the impending election. It is hoped to recover the position as the option to extend the canvass period, which would in normal circumstances end on 30 November, has been exercised. This is allowable because there has been a by-election held within the normal canvass period. Publication of the Electoral Register has therefore been postponed until 1 February 2020, allowing the canvass to continue after the General Election.

The number of returns made interactively via online or text options stands at 50,381 and represents a marginal increase on last year's figure of 49,260, which equates to a 2.6% increase.

3. Valuation for Rating

The main activity in this arena has been the resolution of revaluation appeals. There have been two valuation appeal hearings since the last meeting of the Board. While progress towards resolution of all appeals remains satisfactory, it has been necessary to refer a significant number of appeals for hydroelectric generation subjects to the Lands Tribunal which in other circumstances may not have been necessary. This will have cost implications for the Board. There was due to be one further hearing before the end of the calendar year but as a result of the additional workloads associated with the General Election, a request was submitted for the hearing to be postponed and that was agreed by the Valuation Appeal Committee. The hearing was due to consider the remaining shootings appeals. It is anticipated that negotiation of appeals for that date will continue where possible, with the possibility of a reduction in the number of cases that will ultimately require to be heard by the Valuation Appeal Committee.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues and a council tax hearing was held on 26 September. Further cases have been referred to the Secretary of the Valuation Appeal Committee and it is anticipated that there will be more hearings in January/February 2020.

5. Administration

The long awaited refresh of desktop computer equipment is now underway. A program has been agreed for replacement to take place during November and December. Key electoral staff are being targeted to receive the first batch of devices.

A meeting has taken place with Highland Council to discuss the proposed rent review for the Wick Office. The original proposal of £14,500 has now been withdrawn, along with the application of any backdated element. A new proposal has now been received for a rent of £7,700 to take effect from 4 June 2020. It is intended to accept this proposal.

A change in the contract arrangements with our printer is projected to make savings of the order of £30,000 over the remaining 16 months of the contract. A hybrid desktop mailing service for adhoc mailing is also being introduced which is projected to make a saving in excess of 40p per item posted. Given the large quantity of mail that is sent from the office, the savings will be significant.

6. Staffing

A further attempt will be made to recruit qualified valuation staff during the course of this month. The recruitment of further trainee valuers was delayed, but this will also

now proceed in the same timeframe. Two clerical assistant posts based in the Inverness office will be advertised in due course.

A clerical assistant in the Inverness office is due to retire on 13 December after 11 years of 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: 14 November 2019

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