

**HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD****18 September 2020**

Agenda Item	<b>8</b>
Report No	<b>VAL/4/20</b>

**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**

This is the first report to the Board since the start of the national lockdown on 16 March. Since that time the Assessor and Electoral Registration offices have been closed and national guidance has been followed. The default position remains that staff are working from home although controlled visits to our offices are now permitted for essential purposes.

The main functions of the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer have continued, although performance in certain areas has been compromised to some degree. The senior management team continually seek to address these areas and strive to seek solutions to mitigate difficulties where possible.

In the initial stages of lockdown valuation and technical staff were heavily involved in the resolution of queries in relation to government grants made to business which had an entry in the valuation roll and rateable value as a determining factor.

The other main business since the last meeting of the Board has been associated with the disposal of revaluation appeals, migration to a new electoral management system and implementing legislation changes relating to the electoral canvass, registration of qualifying foreign nationals and prisoner voting. The maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax lists has continued within the restrictions imposed by the current public health situation.

**2. Electoral Registration**

In November 2019, the ERO was advised that the current electoral management software system was to be decommissioned in May 2020. After seeking advice from Procurement, a Crown Commercial Services Framework Agreement was entered into in April 2020, with Democracy Counts. A revised register of electors was republished on 4 August 2020 after comprehensive checking and testing of the new system. The migration and implementation process during lockdown condition proved to be very challenging and staff should be commended for the work undertaken under difficult circumstances.

Canvass reform legislation is now in place, and this will be the first year that the ERO has carried out a full household canvass under the new regime. An information sheet produced by the Cabinet Office on changes to the way the annual canvass will be conducted will be circulated to all elected Members in Highland and Western Isles in due course. Canvass reform changes allow the ERO scope to tailor the canvass to suit local arrangements to safeguard the completeness and accuracy of the register. Canvass communications were issued on 7 September and through the use of local data matching, the number of households going down the simplified route 1 increased from 85,230 to 107,574, with route 2 properties switching from 54,767 to 32,423. A total of 529 properties, where the characteristics of the property make it difficult to canvass in the normal manner, are expected to go down route 3. Forms for these properties will be issued to a nominated responsible person at a later date. The Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Act 2020 now allows for prisoners serving sentences of 12 months or less to register to vote in Scottish elections. The extension of the franchise also allows foreign nationals who have indefinite leave to remain to register to vote, again in Scottish elections.

The ERO has two upcoming by-elections, Ward 3, Na Hearadh agus Ceann a Deas nan Loch on 8 October 2020 and Ward 12, Aird & Loch Ness on 5 November 2020.

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

The main activity in this area during the first few months of lockdown was Covid 19 grant related enquiries. These queries resulted from the fact that government grants were available to businesses that were linked to there being an entry in the valuation roll. This commonly resulted in cases where an entry was requested in the valuation roll that had not previously been made or where a change was requested to the description of an existing entry in the valuation roll. As the grant available was in part a function of the number of entries in the valuation roll, requests to split an existing entry in to two or more separate entries were also received. All of the foregoing requests fell to be considered by the Assessor in terms of existing valuation law and practice rather than grant availability.

The normal workloads have continued. Resolution of revaluation appeals has continued and citation of cases for hearing has progressed as normal. Where resolution has not been reached it has not been possible to hold evidential hearings although procedural hearings by the Valuation Appeal Committee have taken place via video conferencing.

Survey has been possible only in very limited circumstances, but the position remains under constant review.

Legislation has been laid before parliament extending the appeal disposal deadlines which should serve to alleviate some of the pressures that were building in the system. However, approaching two thousand material change of circumstance appeals have been lodged on the grounds that values have been reduced as a consequence of the pandemic. These appeals will be listed for hearing next year.

#### **4. Council Tax**

Maintenance of the council tax list continues within the restraints of the public health situation. While internal inspections of properties have not been carried out thus far, the situation is under review. Where possible the list is updated by reference to information held on file and in plans together with enquiry by email or telephone.

#### **5. Administration**

Discussions are ongoing with Highland Council on works to be carried out in the Wick Office. Some quotations for works have been received but the matter has been held in abeyance during lockdown.

A hybrid desktop mailing service for adhoc mailing has been introduced which is projected to make a saving in excess of 40p per item posted. At present, this solution is restricted to a small number of staff due to installation issues., This is reducing the saving potential at the present time and it is hoped that these matters can be resolved shortly. Ongoing discussions are being held with Wipro and the print supplier to resolve this issue. An update will be provided to the November Board meeting.

Further arrangements are being put in place to improve telephone communication with the public while working from home. Scanning incoming mail and digitising paper files is also being planned.

#### **6. Staffing**

A further attempt is being made to recruit qualified valuation staff. The recruitment of two trainee valuers and two clerical assistants based in the Inverness office has been completed with appointments made in January and February respectively. Training staff while working from home is one area that is proving to be difficult.

A clerical assistant in the Wick office is due to retire on 31 December after 27 years of service.

A staff survey was carried out together with a number of staff meetings with the aim of gathering the views of staff in relation to current and future working arrangements. Generally, it has been identified that homeworking has had a number of positive benefits and staff would hope to have the opportunity for a blend of home and office working in the future.

Staff welfare is a matter of some concern as homeworking can present difficulty in some circumstances and efforts are being made to provide support in such circumstances.

Given the current position and recent statements by government taken together with the demands on the Assessor and ERO between now and the spring of the year it is considered to be expedient to concentrate efforts on improving home working capability rather than a return to normal office working at this time.

**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

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