

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

20 November 2020

Agenda Item	7
Report No	VAL/12/20

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

There has been no significant change to the general operating conditions in relation to the Covid-19 restrictions. Government guidelines continue to be followed and the default position remains that staff are working from home, although controlled visits by staff to our offices are now permitted for essential purposes.

The main functions of the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer have continued, and performance in certain areas continues to be compromised to some degree. Efforts continue to seek solutions to mitigate difficulties where possible.

The main business since the last meeting of the Board on 18 September has been processing returns from the electoral canvass, a by-election in Ward 3, Na Hearadh agus Ceann a Deas nan Loch on 8 October 2020 and general maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list. Preparatory work to deal with Covid-19 material change of circumstance valuation roll appeals has also been progressing.

2. Electoral Registration

The new electoral management software is transitioning to a steady state, or maintenance mode as opposed to migration, although staff training continues to be an issue requiring attention as it is particularly resource intensive and logistically challenging in the home working environment.

The by-election in Ward 3, Na Hearadh agus Ceann a Deas nan Loch on 8 October 2020 was completed successfully from the ERO's perspective, with no clerical errors.

Contingency planning has continued in relation to the Scottish Parliamentary Election. Significant attention is being focussed on the prospect of a late surge in postal voting applications and the measures that may be put in place to mitigate any associated risks. Clearly where peaks in workload are expected to be handled against a background of statutory deadlines, it is imperative that processing is efficient.

While there is an overall improvement, some aspects of processing on the system are relatively slow and initial investigation is pointing to network issues. It is important that these issues are resolved well in advance of the Scottish Parliamentary Election and potential solutions are being considered which reduce the systems reliance on network speed and capacity. Resolving this issue may require expenditure in the current financial year that has not been allowed for in budget but could readily be accommodated from savings elsewhere or from additional funding that may be available from the Scottish Government for the Scottish Parliamentary Election.

The canvass is well under way. The number of properties requiring a full canvass has been significantly reduced as previously reported. We are now in the reminder cycle and follow up by telephone and e-comms are now being undertaken.

A decision has yet to be taken regarding whether to proceed with doorstep visits, given the current situation with the virus. Consultation is in process and a risk-based approach will be utilised when making the final decision.

3. Valuation for Rating

Resolution of revaluation appeals continues. While the original statutory deadline for disposal was the end of this calendar year, an extension of a further year has now been granted. The Valuation Appeal Committee meets virtually by Microsoft Teams, to deal with procedural matters. The Committee has intimated its intention to hold evidential appeals by video conference. There are concerns about the readiness and ability to hear appeals involving the presentation of evidence and cross examination of witnesses by these means.

In addition, over 1,000 Covid-19 material change of circumstance valuation roll appeals have been cited for hearing by the Valuation Appeal Committee in the first quarter of 2021 and this will place an enormous workload on the valuation staff. The statutory timetable initially required disposal of these appeals by the end of March 2021, but that is no longer the case as the time limit has been extended to 31 December 2021.

The other normal workloads associated with maintenance of the valuation roll have continued, although survey continues to be restricted.

The Government has indicated an intention to postpone the 2022 revaluation by 1 year to April 2023 and the Local Government Committee in the Scottish Parliament will be discussing changes to NDR regulations designed to give effect to that change imminently.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the council tax list continues within the restraints of the public health situation. Internal access to property continues to be restricted. 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

The roll out of the desktop mailing service has continued to encounter difficulty and is currently only available on a limited scale. This is disappointing as it has potential benefits in both productivity and cost saving. This matter was reported at the meeting of the Board in September. A meeting is scheduled with Wipro and ICT next week in an effort to resolve the situation.

The issue that had been preventing the use of a capability to email directly from our electoral core system has now been resolved.

A degree of telephone communication has now been established for staff working from home. The system allows operation of the electoral free phone service.

6. Staffing

A post of senior valuer is currently being advertised with a closing date of 24 November.

The filling of clerical vacancies is under review and a limited number of posts may be advertised shortly.

Planning that is currently underway for the Scottish Parliamentary Election includes staffing levels. It is anticipated that temporary staff will be required, and canvassing staff may also be asked to assist.

More generally, efforts continue to be concentrated on improving home working capability rather than a return to normal office working between now and the spring of next year.

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: 13 November 2020

Author: William J Gillies, Assessor & ERO