

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

12 March 2021

Agenda Item	9
Report No	VAL/4/21

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

Government guidelines continue to be followed. The office continues to operate on the basis that there is a presumption that staff should work from home. Limited access is allowed to the office on a controlled basis where this is essential for business functionality.

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 20 November has been processing returns from the electoral canvass, a by-election in Ward 12, Aird and Loch Ness, on 11 March 2021, processing absent votes and applications to register and general maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list. Workload associated with the Covid-19 material change of circumstance (MCC) appeals has taken an enormous amount of valuation staff resource, particularly senior members of staff.

2. Electoral Registration

Staff training in relation to the new electoral management system continues to be challenging in the home working environment

The by-election in Ward 12, Aird and Loch Ness on 11 March 2021, was completed successfully from the ERO's perspective, with only 2 clerical errors.

Given the continuing nature of the covid outbreak, the canvass was concluded without doorstep visits following a risk assessment.

Publication of the register proceeded in December as scheduled. The style of the register has changed in part because the new system is driven by addresses from the corporate address gazetteers (CAG). In some localities, particularly rural ones, this resulted in some presentational difficulties, but these were largely overcome with

the assistance of the software supplier. Future discussion with the CAG teams should help to improve future outcomes.

Implementation of the contingency planning for the Scottish Parliamentary Election has seen the recruitment of temporary staff and training of technical staff and canvassers to assist with processing. Existing vacancies have also been filled. The foregoing measures serve to provide the potential to increase the total number of staff available to handle applications to register and applications for an absent vote from 12 to 40. This contingency has been put in place to address the prospect of a late surge in applications.

An additional 15 laptop computers have also been sourced for use by temporary staff.

The computing environment is being enhanced by utilising a cloud solution that should reduce the reliance on the wide area network which is impacting on processing speed. Temporary IT support has been engaged to assist with the implementation of this project. The costs associated with the project have not been allowed for in this year's budget but will be accommodated from additional funding that has been provided by the Scottish Government for the Scottish Parliamentary Election.

As part of the contingency planning it was identified that the normal process for in house scanning of applications was not viable in a covid safe manner. This was particularly so given the anticipated increase in volume of postal voting applications. The decision was therefore taken to make use of a scanning bureau. The overall most secure and efficient approach that could be identified was to utilise the service offered by our election management software (EMS) supplier. This had the advantage of directly scanning the images into our systems and avoided the need to transfer files between multiple organisations. An additional advantage is that our EMS supplier is well acquainted with the necessary security of the data. One issue that required to be considered was that if the full extent of efficiency and staff safety was to be achieved, the return address for the forms would necessarily be the address of our EMS supplier who is based in Warrington. There have been a very small number of enquiries made to our offices regarding the use of the Warrington address, however the position has largely been accepted once the reason was explained. The main concern appears to be verification that it is a bonafide return address. Explanatory material has been placed on our website in an effort to address any concerns. The small number of enquiries can be considered in the context of approx. 7,700 application forms being sent by our external print contractor.

3. Valuation for Rating

Resolution of revaluation appeals continues. The revised statutory deadline for disposal requires that these appeals are concluded by the end of this calendar year. The Valuation Appeal Committee has met virtually by Microsoft Teams, to deal with procedural matters. While the Committee has intimated its intention to hold evidential appeals by video conference, none have taken place thus far, although there is an evidential hearing scheduled for the end of this month. There remain concerns about the readiness and ability to hear appeals involving the presentation of evidence and cross examination of witnesses by these means. It is anticipated that the cases scheduled to be heard this month should largely be restricted to legal argument.

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 has placed an enormous workload on the valuation staff. As the timetable for disposal currently stands these appeals must be resolved by the end of December of this year. Given the nature of these appeals a number of referrals have been made to the Lands Tribunal for Scotland and those that have been cited for hearing have been continued when they have been called. Highland & Western Isles is the first area to cite these appeals and the only area where these appeals have been listed for hearings in the first quarter of this year. A limited number of areas have now cited a relatively small number of appeals for early summer. The volume of appeals and their complexity has stretched resources to their absolute limit and has endangered the ability to carry out statutory functions.

The above concentration of resource on Covid-19 MCC appeals has resulted in disappointing progress with the resolution of the outstanding 2017 revaluation appeals.

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

The 2022 revaluation has now been postponed to 1 April 2023.

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 now been extended although there remain some outstanding issues.

6. Staffing

One application has been received for a post of valuer, but no appointment has yet been made.

Five senior clerical/clerical posts have now been filled and one clerical member of staff has retired.

Temporary clerical staff have been appointed in support of the Scottish Parliamentary election as outlined in section 2 of this report.

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: 12 March 2021

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