

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

18 June 2021

Agenda Item	6
Report No	VAL/7/21

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

There has been little change in relation to the pandemic adjusted working environment since the last meeting of the Board. Government guidelines continue to be followed and 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, although capability is, overall, improving.

The main business since the last meeting of the Board on 19 March has been in relation to the Scottish Parliamentary Election on 6 May and the general maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list.

2. Electoral Registration

The Scottish Parliamentary Election was completed successfully from the ERO's perspective, with only 13 clerical errors. This was achieved largely through the dedication and hard work of our staff at all levels. The administrative outcome is one that would have been welcome at any national election, but when viewed in the context of a remote home working environment and the more general pandemic government restrictions it is all the more commendable.

The style of the register has changed in part because the new system is driven by addresses from the corporate address gazetteer (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. Discussion was held with the Returning Officer's staff to establish the best available option for the layout of polling station registers for the election. The registers were printed in colour to assist the Presiding Officers and their staff.

The Scottish Government provided additional funding to support additional work by the ERO that was anticipated for this election. This was particularly in relation to an expected increase in the number of postal voting applications. Contingency plans were drawn up involving the recruitment of temporary staff and the training of technical staff and canvassers to assist with processing and provision of additional IT equipment. Remote scanning of documentation was also put in place. All of these measures were introduced and served to provide the capacity to handle the expected surge in applications.

To encourage early applications and thus reduce the risks of a late surge in applications overwhelming the system, the ERO wrote individually to all households and advertising campaigns were put in place to encourage early application. The campaign included television advertising arranged by ERO's in Scotland through the Scottish Assessors Association. Separate advertising was also provided by the Electoral Commission and the Returning Officer, particularly through social media and press releases.

Overall the package of additional resource and public awareness measures were successful in dealing with the additional demand. The table below provides details of the number of electors with absent votes at the election compared with the number at the register publication date of 1 December 2020.

As at 1 Dec 2020	Combined Electorate	No of Postal Votes	No of Proxy Votes	No of Postal Proxy Votes
Highland	18,7823	34,823	255	40
Western Isles	21,684	4,368	32	5
Total	209,507	39,191	287	45

As at 28 Apr 2021	Combined Electorate	No of Postal Votes	No of Proxy Votes	No of Postal Proxy Votes
Highland	191,758	51,104	820	58
Western Isles	22,020	6,374	127	9
Total	213,770	57,478	947	67

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, however there is an indication that there will be an extension to the disposal date for the appeals that have been lodged on the basis that COVID-19 has had an effect on the rateable value of the property.

The UK Government has introduced measures to rule out COVID-19 appeals in England and it is yet to be seen whether the Scottish Government implement similar legislation.

The Valuation Appeal Committee (VAC) has continued to meet virtually by Microsoft Teams, to deal with procedural matters. One substantive, though relatively simple case has now been heard virtually by the VAC, but there remains a question over the suitability of the media for cases more generally. The Committee have indicated an intention to hold in person hearings over the summer and citations have been issued.

The other normal workloads associated with maintenance of the valuation roll have continued, although survey continues to be restricted. There has been an impact over the previous year in time related performance, particularly in relation to valuation roll that is directly related to the effect of pandemic restrictions on our ability to carry out survey.

The postponement of the 2022 revaluation to 1 April 2023 is to be welcomed given the additional difficulties presented by the pandemic, both functionally and more importantly, from a technical valuation perspective.

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. While there has been some effect on time related performance, it is not severe and the position will be recovered.

5. Administration

A clerical member of staff has been appointed to the Central Admin section and a programme of training has commenced. Three new members of clerical staff have also been appointed to support the valuation section in delivering Barclay Reform changes.

A programme of reviewing both HR and Health & Safety policy documents and guidance is nearing completion. A schedule of reviewing these documents periodically is now in place for presentation at future Board meetings. Revised Complaints Handling guidance documents have been circulated to staff.

Assessor & ERO representatives have been invited to New Ways of Working sessions with Highland Council staff, with a view to looking at how the department can implement new approaches to working in the office environment once Scottish Government guidance allows.

6. Staffing

There has been a continued lack of success in attracting staff at valuer level. The Assessor intends to discuss the matter with HR as this has potential for not only recruitment but retention issues.

An Assistant Assessor has taken phased retirement and moved to a post of senior valuer. The Assistant Assessor post will now be advertised.

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: 11 June 2021

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