

**HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD****24 September 2021**

Agenda Item	<b>8</b>
Report No	<b>VAL/16/21</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**

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. Access is allowed to the office on a controlled basis where this is essential for effective 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 improving.

The main business since the last meeting of the Board has been in relation to two local government by-elections and the general maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list.

**2. Electoral Registration**

Two by-elections were held on Thursday 12 August 2021 in Ward 3 (Wick and East Caithness) and Ward 13 (Inverness West). There was one clerical error and one emergency proxy. From the ERO's perspective, these elections were successfully run under the current homeworking conditions.

Work has commenced on the annual canvass of electors under the new canvass reform legislation. Canvass communication A and B letters were issued to households on 11 August 2021. Follow up canvass forms will be issued to non-responding properties who received canvass communication B letters on 6 October 2021 and it is anticipated that doorstep canvassing will commence at the beginning of November.

Thirty five tablets have been purchased for doorstep canvassing to allow for real time information to be available to both electoral registration staff and doorstep canvassers. Tablets will also be used for telephone canvassing of non-responding properties where contact details are available.

Some preparation work is being carried out for the local government elections being held in May 2022. ERO staff are liaising with colleagues in both Highland and Western Isles on the statutory review of electoral arrangements and await the final outcome of the proposals from Scottish Ministers.

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

Resolution of revaluation appeals continues. The statutory deadline for appeal disposal requires that these appeals are concluded by the end of this calendar year. However, there is 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. This has been achieved by an extension to the disposal date for all appeals lodged during the period of COVID-19.

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

The Valuation Appeal Committee (VAC) has recommenced in person hearings to consider substantive cases with a view to meeting the statutory disposal deadline for revaluation appeals.

The other normal workloads associated with maintenance of the valuation roll have continued and survey work is now being undertaken, subject to appropriate health and safety considerations, but it is still envisaged that there will be an impact on time related performance.

Preparatory work has commenced for the 2023 Revaluation. This has mainly been through the issue of return of information forms. This work will be further progressed in the coming months as a forerunner to the analysis and valuation stages.

### **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 although may take place where essential, subject to health and safety considerations. 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**

The Assessor has commenced investigations into the feasibility of bulk scanning of council tax files and some indicative costs have been sought. Completion of this work would substantially reduce required office space. Alternatives such as archive storage should also be considered at this stage.

Members of the Central Admin team have had training from the Treasurer's staff in finance related matters. Training notes are currently being updated or implemented to tie in with the draft Audit Report on P2P. Staff have also been working on moving to a paperless system for invoices.

The electoral management system has now been successfully migrated to a cloud hosted solution. This provides improved capabilities and enhanced flexibility and reduces the exposure to third party time restraints. There are also benefits in terms of resilience.

## **6. Staffing**

The Assessor has been successful in recruiting a new Valuer, who commences post in early October. The Assistant Assessor post will be advertised in the coming weeks along with a newly created post of Electoral Administration Officer. This post has been created due to the retirement of two admin supervisors in 2020 and flexible retirement of a further admin supervisor earlier this month. The postholder will work alongside the management team to assist with the delivery of key electoral events.

Two clerical vacancies in the Inverness Office have been advertised with interviews due to take place at the beginning of October.

## **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: 20 September 2021

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