

AGENDA ITEM 3

Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board held REMOTELY on Friday, 24 September, 2021 at 10.30 a.m.

Present:

Representing The Highland Council:

Mr B Boyd (substitute)
Mr L Fraser
Mr A Graham
Mrs M Paterson

Representing Comhairle nan Eilean Siar:

Mr J Mackay
Mr A MacLeod

In attendance:

Mr W Gillies, Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer
Mr F Finlayson, Assistant Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer
Ms D Sutherland, Corporate Audit Manager, The Highland Council
Ms C Stachan, Accountant, Treasurer's Office
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Clerk's Office

Mr L Fraser in the Chair

Preliminaries

Reference was made to whether Board meetings should be webcasted for public viewing and the Board were of the view that this matter should be considered by the new Board after the Local Government Elections in 2022.

Business

1. Apologies Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr K Gowans, Mr A MacKinnon, Mr D Macleod and Ms L Denovan, Treasurer.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of Meeting Geàrr-chunntas Coinneimh

There had been circulated Minutes of Meeting of 18 June, 2021, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

4. Matters Arising from the Minutes Gnothaichean Ag Èirigh on Gheàrr-chunntas

There were no matters arising from the Minutes.

5. Membership Ballrachd

The Board **NOTED** that Mr D Mackay had been appointed as a Highland Council substantive Member replacing Mr J Gray.

6. Revenue Budget Monitoring Statement Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseit Teachd-a-Steach

There was circulated Report No VAL/14/21 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer which set out the revenue monitoring position of the Board for the period to 31 August, 2021 and the projected year end position.

The monitoring statement showed net expenditure to date was £1.141m and represented 33% of the annual budget of £3.445m. At this point in the year, the overall outturn was expected to be an underspend of £0.150m, however, as in previous years, this projection was sensitive to the eventual outturn of the annual electoral canvass.

In particular, reference was made to the underspend in salary costs as there had been changes in staffing due to flexible retirement or vacancies. Also, there had been an underspend in legal expenses, but this was expected to be fully spent by the year end as more fees were expected to be paid in 2021/22.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- The Board was a separate legal entity from the Highland Council or Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and therefore there was no capacity for underspend in staffing to be transferred to pay for nurses, health or social care staff for example. It was explained that any underspend at the end of the financial year, assuming reserves were full, was returned to constituent Councils.
- In reference to the underspend in salary costs, attempts were made to fill posts vacancies, but in respect of Valuers, salaries that were being offered were not attractive to applicants so it was challenging to recruit to these posts.
- In relation to Valuation Appeal Committee expenses, the significant expense was the payment to independent solicitors who provided Secretarial services to the Committee.
- There were very minimal costs to the department from staff working from home and there were no direct grants made to staff for home working costs. Employees could claim a small tax relief for working from home by making a claim to HMRC.
- In relation to the Annual Accounts, these would normally be submitted to this meeting, but due to Covid-19 there was a delay in auditing the accounts. There was Coronavirus legislation which gives a 2 month extension for the submission of Accounts and therefore the Annual Accounts would be submitted to the Board meeting in November, 2021.

The Board **NOTED** the contents of the report.

**7. Internal Audit Report – Review of Purchase to Pay
Aithisg In-sgrùdaidh – Ath-sgrùdadh air Ceannach gu Pàigheadh**

There was circulated Report No. VAL/15/21 by the Corporate Audit Manager, The Highland Council which provided details of the audit review of the Purchase to Pay system. There were a number of findings which were set out in the report. The conclusion of the findings was that there had been effective processing of most purchases, but there were some areas on non compliance identified, particularly to raise official purchase orders when expected. This raised some concerns about the effectiveness of expenditure controls and the management of the budget. There was a good Management response to the audit findings as was detailed in the action plan to address the findings in the audit and some of the recommendations had already been carried out in advance of the target date in the action plan.

It was advised that the Board would usually review its Financial Regulations after the Highland Council had reviewed theirs and the Council had just recently done this. It would be for the Assessor to see what changes had been made to check if they should be mirrored in the Board's regulations. It was queried if there should be a review of the regulations every 3 years for example.

The Board:-

i **NOTED** the contents of the report; and

ii **AGREED** that it would be checked and reported to the next meeting, when the Board's Financial Regulations were last reviewed and what the review period was.

**8. Departmental Report
Aithisg Roinneil**

There was circulated Report No VAL/16/21 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer which outlined the main business of the office of the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer since the last meeting of the Board.

The main business since the last meeting had been in relation to two local government by-elections and the general maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list. From the Electoral Registration Officers' perspective, these elections were successfully run and the Board's appreciation to Staff for managing these events was highlighted, as it had been a challenging period given staff were still working from home.

It was queried if Members would receive an updated paper copy of the electoral register and this request would be passed onto staff. Electronic updates to the register were sent to Members.

It was proving more difficult to recruit to posts at a senior level in local government given salaries in the private sector were often higher, so it was welcomed that a new Valuer had been recruited who would commence post in early October. There were other aspects of a contract in local government that could compensate for the lower salary levels and while this had been successful in the past in attracting candidates, it was felt this was no longer the case. There were particular challenges in recruiting

chartered surveyors, as there was a shortage of them nationally and all Assessors departments were facing the same difficulty.

The electoral management system had now been successfully migrated to a cloud hosted solution. The back up arrangements for the cloud solution were comparable to the previous system. Security checks were undertaken to ensure the cloud system was secure and Members were reassured that there was an overall improvement in security.

The Board **NOTED** the contents of the report.

The meeting ended at 11.15 a.m.