

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

18 February 2022

Agenda Item	8
Report No	VAL/4/22

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

The Omicron variant of the virus resulted in a return to a stricter working from home policy, with office visits generally only taking place for essential reasons and on a controlled basis.

Government guidelines now indicate a move towards more hybrid working and arrangements will now be put in place to gradually implement that position.

The main functions of the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer have continued, although time related performance in certain areas continues to be compromised to some degree.

The main business for the valuation sections since the last meeting of the Board has been the general maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list and the issue of Assessors Information Notices (AINs). Electoral staff have been carrying out general maintenance and statutory maintenance. The Highland Council Ward 21 by-election took place on 2 December 2021.

2. Electoral Registration

The local government by-election for Highland Council Ward 21, Fort William and Ardnamurchan was held on 2 December 2021. This election was carried out successfully with no clerical errors recorded.

Due to the Statutory Review of Electoral Arrangements by Boundaries Scotland, boundary changes for the Na h-Eileanan an Iar Council area required a republication of the register on 2 February, before the Local Government Elections in May 2022. The Highland Council Register was also republished due to changes after the annual canvass of electors.

Doorstep canvassing is due to commence later this month after easing of restrictions due to the Omicron variant. Training has been carried out with some canvassers in the use of tablets and some telephone canvassing has been carried out.

The annual refresh of signatures is now underway with cancellation notices due to be issued for any elector who has not responded by 23 February 2022. A household notification letter was issued to all properties in Highland and Western Isles on 4 February 2022 highlighting deadline dates and encouraging early application for the Scottish Local Government elections. Preparation work for these elections is now underway.

3. Valuation for Rating

All 2017 revaluation appeals were disposed of in advance of the statutory deadline at the end of the calendar year.

The UK Government has commenced introduction of measures to rule out COVID-19 appeals in England. A Scottish Parliamentary Bill has been published and a consultation process is underway. While the legislation is similar, the Scottish legislation as currently drafted does not go as far as the English legislation and leaves open a period where appeals can be considered. This has the potential for serious resource implications.

The normal workloads associated with maintenance of the valuation roll have continued and survey work can now be expanded as the threat from the most recent wave of the virus wanes.

Preparatory work continues for the 2023 Revaluation. Significant numbers of enquiry forms or "Assessors Information Notices" (AINs) have now been issued and more will follow in the coming months. The information gathered from these enquiry forms is essential to carry out the necessary analysis for the 2023 non-domestic rates revaluation. An initial analysis must be completed in advance of estimates that are to be provided to the Scottish Government by 15 March 2022. This work is now well underway and will continue in the coming weeks.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the council tax list continues within the restraints of the public health situation. As with other areas of business, the improving situation should allow a gradual return to more normal working in the coming months although it currently remains the case that internal access to property is restricted, although it may take place where essential, subject to health and safety considerations. The council tax list continues to be maintained by reference to information held on file and in plans, together with enquiry by email or telephone. Avoiding delays that result in significant backdating of council tax bills remains a priority, although the structure of the legislation means that a degree of backdating is inevitable.

5. Administration

After the recent announcement by the Scottish Government on easing of Covid-19 restrictions around return to office working, preparation work on how to accommodate some sort of hybrid working is being undertaken by the senior management team. Some additional IT equipment may require to be purchased due to a shortage of equipment from the Highland Council's IT provider.

The Assessor is in early discussions with Highland Council about switching to Sharepoint for electronic documentation storage as part of the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011.

6. Staffing

Since the last Board meeting, two clerical members of staff have resigned, leading to vacancies to be filled. An Administrative Assistant post is currently advertised for the Central Admin Team. As previously reported, staff recruitment is becoming more difficult across all fields of work.

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: 14 February 2022

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