

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

20 June 2022

Agenda Item	7
Report No	VAL/11/22

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

Homeworking continued to be the default position in the period up until the Local Government Elections in May.

There is now a gradual move towards more office working.

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 start of the analysis for the 2023 Revaluation. Electoral staff have undertaken the necessary preparation and execution of the ERO's responsibility for the Local Government Elections and general maintenance of the Electoral Register.

2. Electoral Registration

As previously reported, the Statutory Review of Electoral Arrangements by Boundaries Scotland, introduced boundary changes for the Na h-Eileanan an Iar Council area. This 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.

The main focus of work by electoral registration staff was delivery of the Local Government Elections on 5 May 2022. There were four uncontested wards across the Board area, one in Highland (Ward 11 – Caol and Mallaig) and three in Western Isles (Ward 1 - Barraigh Agus Bhatarsaigh, Ward 6 - Sgìr' Ùige agus Carlabhagh and Ward 11 - Sgìre an Rubha). Two by-elections are being held in Ward 1 and Ward 6 in Western Isles on 30 June 2022.

The elections were run successfully from an ERO perspective with only two clerical errors being recorded.

Annual doorstep canvassing using tablets commenced in March 2022 once the remaining Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. Some canvassing staff have also recommenced doorstep canvassing of invitation to register forms which has been on

hold since March 2020. Staff are now in the process of preparing for the 2022 annual canvass of electors which commences on 1 August 2022. A number of electoral canvassers resigned during the Covid-19 pandemic and a recruitment campaign will be undertaken prior to the commencement of canvass.

On 28 April 2022 the Elections Act 2022 received Royal Assent. The Act initiates a number of changes to electoral registration including the introduction of photographic voter identification for in-person voting, extending the franchise for overseas electors, and changes to current arrangements for postal and proxy voting. Further updates on the Elections Act 2022 will be reported at future board meetings.

3. Valuation for Rating

The Scottish Government has introduced the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill which aims to introduce measures to substantially reduce the scope of appeals against the adverse effect of COVID-19 in Scotland. Similar legislation has been introduced in England. The Scottish Parliamentary Bill has been published and is currently at stage 3 in the process. 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. The final wording is awaited and will determine the extent to which the potential for significant workload remains.

The normal workloads associated with maintenance of the valuation roll have continued and survey work has now been extended as restrictions have been removed and the risks from the Omicron variant recede.

Preparatory work for the 2023 Revaluation is well underway. An initial analysis was completed in advance of estimates that were provided to the Scottish Government in March 2022. This work provided useful groundwork and more detailed and extensive analysis will now be undertaken. Those members of staff that are members of the Scottish Assessors Association (SAA) are taking forward their responsibilities through the committee structure of the SAA for specialist subject valuations and the preparation of subject practice notes.

4. Council Tax

Maintenance of the council tax list continues. As with other areas of business, the improving situation is allowing a gradual return to more normal working. While there is now less reason not to carry out internal inspections, the experience of working during the pandemic has to some degree resulted in a reappraisal of the necessity for internal inspections and the potential for cost savings and more efficient working is now considered. Information held on file and in plans, together with enquiry by email or telephone can often provide all of the necessary detail required. 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

Now that COVID-19 restrictions have been removed steps are being taken towards resuming more office based working. While this had been anticipated at the end of 2021, the emergence of the Omicron variant resulted in a delay. It was considered that delay would increase the risk of staff shortage due to sick leave in the run up to the Local Government Elections.

It is envisaged that a mix of home and office or hybrid working will shortly be adopted by most members of staff. This will require some office reconfiguration to provide hot desking facilities and improved spaces for meetings and staff collaboration.

The Dingwall Office will close before the end of June and provision will be made for staff within the Inverness Office.

The intention had been to take a lease of smaller storage facilities to accommodate subject files held within the Dingwall Office. This has proved to be very difficult with approaches to Highland Council, Highlife Highland and letting agencies failing to provide any appropriate accommodation. Additional space has now been taken on a short term three month lease within Moray House to accommodate files. The aim is to start the process of digitalisation over the summer period and the position will then be reviewed. The cost is broadly similar to that for storage accommodation and results in an ongoing saving with the full saving being achieved when the digitisation is completed.

Some preliminary work has been carried out with AVC Wise on the Salary Sacrifice Shared Cost AVCs. It is hoped that the Assessor can look at an implementation plan with AVC Wise to work alongside Western Isles Council.

6. Staffing

The recruitment and retention of staff remains a serious issue. Difficulties in recruiting staff has now spread across all posts. There have been 9 members of staff who have left for jobs elsewhere since September 2021. Measures to address this issue must now be taken if a serious impact on service provision is to be avoided.

A Senior Valuer in the Stornoway office is due to retire on 17 June after 48 years of service.

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: 13 June 2022

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