

# HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

22 September 2023

Agenda Item	5
Report No	VAL/16/23

## 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 business for the valuation section since the last meeting of the Board has been focussed on the processing of revaluation proposals and the audit of self-catering subjects. The main business for electoral staff has been the annual canvass of electors which commenced on 10 July 2023. A by-election is being held in Ward 7 - Tain and Easter Ross on 28 September 2023.

#### 2. Electoral Registration

Central admin staff are still working alongside the Board's electoral management software (EMS) supplier to address the issue of register layout previously raised by Members. Whilst some work can be progressed at this time, a majority of the changes will need to be implemented when the revised register of electors is produced, as properties will move within the register and risk changing elector numbers. An update on this work will be presented to Members at the November Board meeting.

The annual canvass of electors commenced on 10 July 2023. The results of local and national data matching are noted below, with a comparison carried out with 2022 results. Information on the number of canvass communications issued compared to 2022 has also been provided.

National data matching involves checking of information on existing electors on the register using name, address, UPRN (where information is held) and date of birth (if held) against data held by the Department for Work and Pensions. This match allows the ERO to identify properties where the household composition may have changed. This information is then used to determine which type of communication each property should receive. Route 1 is the matched property route, with route 2 being the unmatched property route.

#### 2023 – National Data Match results

Route	National data match result (properties)
Route 1	92,260
Route 2	52,527

## 2022 – National Data Match results

<b>Route</b>	<b>National data match result (properties)</b>
<b>Route 1</b>	88,166
<b>Route 2</b>	55,263

## 2023 – National and Local Data matching results by %

	<b>National data matching</b>	<b>Local data matching</b>
<b>Elector level</b>	82.86%	92.92%
<b>Property level</b>	63.72%	77.32%

## 2022 – National and Local Data matching results by %

	<b>National data matching</b>	<b>Local data matching</b>
<b>Elector level</b>	82.16%	91.10%
<b>Property level</b>	61.47%	76.53%

## Number of forms issued

<b>Communication Type</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
CCA	109,774	111,942
CCB	33,499	32,526
Canvass form	23,124	22,948
Route 3 properties	166	309

An information leaflet on Voter ID was distributed with all canvass communications. To date, we have issued approximately 60 Voter Authority Certificates to electors since the service went live on 16 January 2023.

A by-election is being held in Ward 7 – Tain and Easter Ross on 28 September 2023. A timetable has been prepared and issued to all staff.

Staff attended the Highland Youth Parliament conference which was held on 23 June 2023 in Inverness to encourage voter registration. ERO staff engaged with a number of young people at the event. Checks were carried out of the electoral register to see if those that engaged with staff were registered. Where they were not registered, staff either provided further information on how to register or registered applicants via the Government's Digital Service. A total of six new electors were registered at the event.

ERO staff are attending several Fresher's Events at UHI in September. Promotional materials will be made available and again, register checks will be conducted where possible. Those not on the register will be encouraged to apply online or provided with further information on how to register to vote. Information on Voter ID, registering as a student, registering as a foreign national and leaflets on employment as electoral canvassers will also be available. The events to be attended are below. Returning Officer staff from Highland Council will also be in attendance on 12 and 13 September with Returning Officer staff from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar in attendance on 28 September 2023.

<b>UHI location</b>	<b>Date</b>
Inverness	12 and 13 September 2023
Thurso	19 and 20 September 2023
Scottish School of Forestry	20 September 2023
Fort William	21 and 22 September 2023
Portree	26 September 2023
Stornoway	27 and 28 September 2023

ERO staff are undertaking some work with Returning Officer staff in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to promote electoral registration and Voter ID to 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year pupils within the authority's four secondary schools. The work will include provision of posters and information leaflets, along with Resources for Educators provided by the Electoral Commission, which includes lesson plans, short activities and assembly resources.

Staff in the Central Admin Team have been working with the Board's electoral management software (EMS) supplier to produce community council registers for the Highland Council Returning Officer. This has taken up staff resource at a time when the department is short of staff and having difficulty in recruiting. There have been a number of issues identified in carrying out this work however, these have been overcome with assistance from the EMS supplier and Highland Council GIS staff. The EMS system will need to be updated regularly with community council information for any new build properties and the Depute ERO will look at a process with Valuation and Electoral staff to capture this information.

Preparatory work has started on the latest tranche of changes effected by the Elections Act. Amongst other matters these changes affect the rules surrounding voter identification, proxy voting and online absent voting applications. These issues will be explored at the joint EMB/Electoral Commission conference in Dundee on 6 October.

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

Since the last meeting of the Board the valuation sections have been heavily involved with the processing of revaluation proposals against the rateable values effective from 1 April 2023, and also the audit of self-catering property on the Valuation Roll.

Prior to the 2023 revaluation a ratepayer, or their agent could submit an appeal, by 30 September in the revaluation year, simply stating in a letter that they wished to appeal the rateable value.

Changes in legislation brought in a more complex system whereby ratepayers submit proposals. Before a proposal can be acknowledged as complete the ratepayer, or their agent, must submit the documentation required which includes: their alternative value, grounds of appeal, evidence that they have based their opinion of value on, and, if an agent is representing a client, confirmation that they have the instruction to act on their behalf. These processes are further compounded by each proposal having to be submitted individually, and not as previous, within a list of appeals.

The closing date for proposals had been set for 31 July but following representations by ratepayers, and rating agents, a legislative change was made to extend this to 31 August.

The effect of these changes is to reduce the number of proposals substantially. This had been anticipated as the regulations were put in place to deter speculative blanket proposals for a ratepayer's portfolio.

The bedding in of this process has led to changes in IT systems to reflect the new legislation. The new proposals system has also created new administrative processes for the collation and review of information attached to each proposal to ensure that it meets the criteria to be deemed complete, in terms of the regulations.

The other new workstream has been the implementation of the review of self-catering units currently on the Valuation Roll. This process has been somewhat complex and lengthy. This process has involved the issue of 5,136 questionnaires to ascertain whether properties met the criteria of the new regulations. The initial return, prior to the issue of a prompt letter, was at 3,194. The prompt letter brought further returns and to date the operators of 2,333 properties have received letters confirming their status for 2022/23. Steps are being taken to return those properties which either do not meet the criteria or have not responded, to the Council Tax list. Prior to doing this each property will have to have its band reflect the property as it stands now, as it may have had alterations in the interim that affect its banding for Council Tax.

Due to the volumes involved the exercise to place properties on the Council Tax list is being co-ordinated with both constituent authorities.

The process for transferring appeals to the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service is nearing completion but as yet no appeals have been listed for hearing at either the First-tier Tribunal or the Upper Tribunal.

#### **4. Council Tax**

Normal levels of service have resumed post revaluation although some resource has been diverted to the self-catering audit. New entries on the Council Tax list this year will be swollen by subjects which were previously valued as self-catering units.

The first cases have now been cited for hearing before the Local Taxation Chamber with four cases listed for 11 October 2023, three for 27 October 2023, and a further two cases on 9 November 2023. All cases are set to take place over a video platform (Webex).

#### **5. Administration**

The Salary Sacrifice Shared Cost AVCs went live on 1 September 2023. The management team attended a briefing on 14 August 2023. Promotional materials have been sent to all staff who are members of the Local Government Pension Scheme. Webinars are being held on 15 September and 18 September 2023.

The SharePoint project, which improves the organisation of, and access to, electronic files is still progressing. Training in the use of SharePoint is currently being explored with the Highland Council. Short training sessions will be delivered by the IT Systems Manager to staff.

A Records Management Plan progress update review was submitted to the Keeper of the Records of Scotland at the end of March 2023. The Records Manager has been advised of a delay in receiving the draft report. It is anticipated that the draft report should be received by September/October.

Between 2 June and 31 August 2023, the Assessor received two complaints which were investigated at Stage 1. Both complaints were dealt with at Stage 1 however, due to delay in information being sent to the management team, one response took 6 working days to respond to instead of 5 working days as set out in our complaints handling procedure documentation. A reminder has been sent to staff about the complaints handling procedure.

The Business Manager is working alongside Highland Council staff on the implementation of a new HR/Finance/Payroll system which is due for rollout from February 2024. The attendance at a number of meetings, demos and workshops, along with provision of information is proving to be time consuming however, the Assessor can see the benefits that the new system will bring to the department.

Due to conflicting demands on Central Admin staff time and staff absence due to sick leave or annual leave, some projects may be put on hold to focus on more pressing matters such as Elections Act implementation, new HR/Finance/Payroll system, annual canvass of electors and Ward 7 by-election. Overtime work is being carried out by some staff and the Assessor will be kept regularly updated of work progress.

## **6. Staffing**

A clerical position that was advertised in June 2023 for the Inverness Office will need to be readvertised in due course.

A temporary Admin Assistant post for the Central Admin Team has been advertised, with applications due to be shortlisted at the end of August/beginning of September.

The post of Valuer has been readvertised again. This position has been advertised continuously since 2019. As previously reported, there is a shortage of Valuers across the country.

The number of applicants for posts advertised has been particularly low. It is understood that this is an issue affecting public sector employers within our locality. However, it may be that the Board is disadvantaged on two fronts. Firstly, on Myjobscotland, the website where vacancies are advertised, other vacancies can be applied for online. This is not a facility available to the Board and applicants must download a copy of the application form and fill it in manually. Advertising of jobs through the Myjobscotland platform is being discussed with the Highland Council. Secondly, the Assessor is being asked for a company logo for platforms such as the

AVC Wise portal and Myjobscotland. The introduction of a logo would distinguish the Board from its constituent authorities.

**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 September 2023

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