

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

17 November 2023

Agenda Item	5
Report No	VAL/26/23

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 involved processing the volume of revaluation proposals that arrived as the deadline of 30 September 2023 approached, the audit of self-catering subjects and the first council tax cases to be heard before the First-Tier Tribunal. The main business for electoral staff has been the annual canvass of electors which commenced on 10 July 2023 and preparation for changes to postal and proxy voting for UK Parliamentary Elections. A by-election was held in Ward 7 - Tain and Easter Ross on 28 September 2023.

2. Electoral Registration

A by-election was held in Ward 7 – Tain and Easter Ross on 28 September 2023. From the ERO's perspective, this was a well-run election with no clerical errors.

On 5 October 2023, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities confirmed that the implementation of the online absent vote application service and postal and proxy voting revisions was to go ahead on 31 October as planned. Since this time, central admin and electoral staff have been attending various training sessions, online demos and a number of meetings on the changes. A meeting was held with all electoral staff on 25 October at the Town House Chamber in Inverness to discuss changes to working practices. A briefing note on changes to postal and proxy voting for UK Parliamentary Elections will be circulated to all Elected Members.

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. 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. Due to the annual canvass of electors, administration for the Ward 7 by-election and preparation work for Election Act changes, it has not been possible to progress this work as planned however, priority will be given to this task in the coming weeks.

Doorsteps visits are now being carried out as part of the annual canvass process. A total of 16,038 properties are due to be visited. Due to the statutory review of polling places and polling stations currently being undertaken by constituent authorities, the publication of the revised register is scheduled for 3 January 2024.

ERO staff attended several Fresher's Events at UHI venues in September. Whilst it was felt that attendance at these events was useful, there was mixed success in engaging with potential new electors. This was due to students either studying from home in outlying areas when events were being held or transport issues as a result of strike action by school support staff. Most of the students who engaged with staff were already registered to vote however, 24 potential new electors were issued with invitation to register forms.

The ERO and Depute ERO attended a joint EMB/Electoral Commission conference in Dundee on 6 October on preparing for a UK Parliamentary general election and beyond. Lessons learnt from this event have now been captured in a risk and actions register. The Depute ERO has been in contact with Returning Officer staff at both Moray and Argyll & Bute Councils to arrange meetings to discuss cross-boundary working considerations for the delivery of the next UK Parliamentary general election.

3. Valuation for Rating

The last date for submitting 2023 Revaluation proposals was on 30 September. A large volume was received in the run up to midnight which have taken the valuation sections some time to sift through and add to the valuation system. The proposals process is more complex than the previous appeals regime and as such many have required the admin team to request further information so that the proposal could be deemed complete. The new regime has been designed so that spurious proposals are not submitted by rating agents.

To this end it has had an effect as proposal numbers are down in comparison with the number of appeals received at the 2017 revaluation.

By way of comparison 4,358 appeals were received at the 2017 revaluation whereas 1,917 proposals have been received as at 30 September 2023. Although the numbers are lower this does not necessarily translate into a lighter workload. The 2023 proposals are all backed up by evidence for the ratepayer or their agent and as such each will require early intervention. A schedule is being compiled to set out a balanced workload to dispose of these appeals before the statutory disposal date which is 30 September 2025.

The pre-2023 revaluation appeals have now been transferred to the First-Tier Tribunal and they have begun listing appeals for hearings with a small number of cases listed for 30 November, 14 December and 24 January 2024. Previously under the old regime operated by the valuation appeal panel the Assessor would have met with the Chairperson and Secretary to schedule cases for the forthcoming year. However, the First-Tier Tribunal is currently listing cases for hearing with three months' notice which can have a resource consequence for the Assessor.

The Upper Tribunal for Scotland which deals with more complex cases is presently evaluating responses from ratepayers as to the status of these cases. Highland and Western Isles have 270 cases sitting with the Tribunal. The vast majority of these proposals fall into two categories: Covid-19 material change of circumstances appeals and revaluation 2017 hydroelectricity appeals. It is anticipated that a hydroelectricity case will be held by the Upper Tribunal early in 2024.

4. Council Tax

The survey and banding of houses for council tax is progressing well in all areas with normal levels of service being achieved.

The First-Tier Tribunal has made decisions on four cases which were heard before them in October. The cases were conducted over the Webex video platform as opposed to the in-person hearings which were favoured by the valuation appeal committees who previously heard such cases. In each of the cases the tribunal favoured the evidence of the Assessor's witnesses. The procedures are somewhat different to those of the previous regime and in each of the cases the Assessor acted in the advocate's role. One of the witnesses was a graduate valuer for whom it was their first time giving such evidence. A case listed for 9 November will also involve a graduate valuer giving evidence. Although presenting evidence at such an early stage in their careers can be a testing experience, the graduates are carrying out their duties in a methodical and professional manner.

5. Administration

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 and the draft feedback report has now been received. Comments are to be reviewed by the end of November 2023 before the Keeper's findings are published on the National Records of Scotland website.

Between 1 September and 31 October, the Assessor received 3 complaints. Two related to electoral registration and were dealt with at Stage 1. The final complaint received related to Council Tax and was dealt with at Stage 2.

It had been intended to present the draft budget for 2024/25 to the November Board meeting however, a number of factors have led to this being postponed until early 2024. The Convener and Vice Convener have both been informed of the delay.

6. Staffing

The Depute Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer and Assistant Assessor posts have now been advertised with a closing date of 20 October 2023. Interviews for both posts will be held on 7 November 2023.

A clerical assistant post for the Inverness Office has been advertised with a closing date of 20 October 2023. Interviews will be held on 8 November 2023.

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.

An Admin Assistant based in the Stornoway office has resigned with effect from 31 October 2023. This post will be advertised as soon as possible. An Admin Assistant in the Central Admin Team has also resigned with effect from 1 December 2023. The Assessor is working with the Highland Council HR Team to look at seconding staff from Highland Council to cover short term vacancies and sickness absence.

A Senior Technical Assistant will be retiring from the department in February 2024.

The post of Electoral & IT Support Officer has been advertised internally with an appointment made on 17 October 2023.

Presently the Board does not have an occupational health services provider. The Highland Council has recently entered into a new agreement with PAM but there is no provision for the Board to access those services. This matter has been urgently raised with The Highland Council's Head of People.

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: 7 November 2023

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