

**HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD**

**20 June 2024**

Agenda Item	<b>5</b>
Report No	<b>VAL/5/24</b>

**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, the audit of self-catering subjects, the disposal of revaluation proposals and legacy 2017 appeals. The main business for electoral staff has been processing new applications by overseas electors for UK Parliamentary Elections, work on by-elections and beginning to prepare for canvass, and following the announcement on 22 May that there will be a UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) staff have now turned to the processes required for the successful running of the election.

**2. Electoral Registration**

In January 2024 the rules on eligibility to register as an overseas voter changed. The previous rule that someone could only register for 15 years after they left the UK was abolished. There were a steady number of applications from day one with some cases proving to be complex and time consuming and often requiring staff to visit archive centres and libraries to retrieve information from old electoral registers.

Steps had been taken to run an early canvass as the signals were that a UKPGE would most likely be held later in the calendar year. Data matching slots had been booked and arrangements were being made with printers to produce and post out the annual canvass communications. This work has now been shelved as a result of the UKPGE being called and will now be held later on in the year. Dates have still to be confirmed.

A by-election for The Highland Council was held successfully for Ward 19 (Inverness South) on 11 April, and a further by-election is being held in Ward 7 (Tain and Easter Ross) on 13 June. A by-election in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has also been called on 4 July, the same day as the UKPGE, for Ward 4 (Na Hearadh).

Following the announcement on 22 May that a UKPGE would be held on 4 July electoral priorities changed. Staff had been doing preparatory work in the months leading up to the announcement including training days on Election Act changes Staff have begun to focus on the work required for the delivery of the election.

It was noted that there was an increase overnight in the number of people looking to be registered, applying for an absent vote, and to receive a Voter Authority Certificate.

In addition to bringing in a range of changes to legislation, a change in constituency boundaries has resulted in cross boundary work with the Returning Officers (ROs) in Moray Council and Argyll and Bute Council, as well as our constituent authorities.

Early key dates within the election timetable have been met, including the production of the June registers and absent voters lists which will be supplied to candidates, and the upload of data for the poll cards which ROs will issue on 10 June 2024.

A summary of key events is displayed on our website and is noted below:

Poll Cards Dispatched	Monday 10 June 2024
Overseas Postal Packs dispatched	Monday 17 June 2024
Deadline for registering to vote	Tuesday 18 June 2024 (midnight)
Ballot packs dispatched – first issue for those that applied up to 7 <sup>th</sup> June 2024	Wednesday 19 June 2024
Deadline for receiving new postal vote and postal proxy applications and for changes to existing postal or proxy votes	Wednesday 19 June 2024 (5pm)
Further Poll Card Dispatch	Tuesday 25 June 2024
Deadline for receiving new applications to vote by proxy (not postal proxy or emergency proxies)	Wednesday 26 June 2024 (5pm)
Deadline for receiving applications for Voter Authority Certificates	Wednesday 26 June 2024 (5pm)
Further Ballot packs dispatched for those that applied after 7 <sup>th</sup> June 2024 up until the deadline of 19 <sup>th</sup> June 2024	Wednesday 26 June 2024

The Board will be updated at the meeting as to progress as we reach these key dates.

### 3. Valuation for Rating

Work continues on the scheduling of the 2023 Revaluation proposals, but staff are also dealing with a number of legacy 2017 running roll appeals which are making their way through the appeals system, and hearings have been called by the First-tier Tribunal with the next hearing being on 17 June. A further four dates, 13 August, 26 September, 23 October and 11 November, have been set aside for legacy cases which require to be disposed of by 31 December 2024.

As reported previously Highland and Western Isles were one of the two lead Assessors, with Tayside VJB, on Self-Catering Units. Those proposals have now largely been disposed of, and a similar outcome has happened with Salmon Fishing

Rights, Shooting Rights and Deer Forests where a similar joint approach to dealing with the proposals was carried out successfully with the Tayside VJB.

Valuation staff are now engaging with ratepayers locally with a view to disposing of their proposals. Typically, these subjects are shops, offices, and workshops.

The second year of the self-catering audit has begun, but there are still a sizeable number from last year to be concluded. As reported previously this stream of work progressed slowly last year, as the process was not as straightforward as first envisaged and has had an effect on key performance indicators with the changes to both the valuation roll and council tax list inevitably taking longer than three months to action.

With amendment Regulations now in place and improvements made to the SAA Portal for receiving information, it is anticipated that although this will still be a considerable task, there will be time savings due to these changes. Applications can now be submitted online and fed into our valuation system. This will make the process less paper intensive. The first batch were issued on 15 May, and with operators having 56 days to make a satisfactory return or be transferred to the council tax list, it is difficult to quantify how successful the change in approach will be this year. Early signs are encouraging in terms of returns made.

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

Although technical staff have been made available for assisting on Electoral matters the survey and banding of houses for council tax should not be adversely affected in the short term.

There has been no council tax hearing before the First-Tier Tribunal since the last Board meeting.

#### **5. Administration**

Parts of the office server have now moved to SharePoint and other parts are in the process of being moved. Both electoral and valuation staff are now using SharePoint and becoming familiar with its use. Any new categories of data are set up directly on SharePoint rather than on the server.

A meeting was held on 27 May with ICT to discuss backup procedures as part of disaster recovery. Other aspects of disaster recovery and cyber security have still to be covered. SharePoint meetings are ad hoc as required. It is intended to review cloud hosting with ICT later in the year.

Since the last Board meeting six complaints have been received. Three related to electoral registration with two resolved at stage 1 and one at stage 2. There were also three complaints related to valuation which were all resolved at stage 1.

The Central Admin Team has been dealing with the migration from Integra Financials to the CiA financial system. This has involved training and changes to working

practices. The Central Admin Team have also been working on financial year end processes.

## **6. Staffing**

As reported at the last Board meeting the Depute Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer was appointed and took up his post on 1 March 2024. Similarly, a Divisional Valuer, and a Valuer started on 19 February 2024 and 1 March 2024 respectively.

It can be confirmed that following interviews in Stornoway the Clerical Assistant and Admin Assistant posts were successfully filled with posts taken up on 27 February 2024 and 18 March 2024 respectively. The Admin Assistant/Secretary post based in Inverness was successfully filled on 4 March 2024

Following the resignation of a Graduate Trainee Valuer from the Inverness office, the post was advertised, and the successful candidate took up post on 1 April 2024.

A Senior Clerical Assistant vacancy in the Inverness electoral section was filled by an internal applicant following interview on 25 January 2024.

Following interviews for two vacant Field Officer posts one post was successfully filled with the successful applicant starting on 1 July 2024. The other post will be re-advertised shortly.

The Admin Assistant post, assisting with overseeing the valuation support teams was successfully filled by an internal candidate.

Two Senior Clerical Assistant posts were advertised in the valuation admin section. One was created by the promotion of the post holder to the Admin Assistant post within the section, and the other through an internal appointment to the electoral team. Following interviews, one post was filled by an internal candidate. The other post remains vacant and will be re-advertised shortly.

An Admin Assistant within Central Admin was appointed on 20 May 2024 following the resignation of the previous post holder.

A valuer retired after more than 40 years' service with the Board on 17 May 2024, and a clerical assistant has made it known that she intends to retire after more than 18 years of service on 31 July 2024.

It has been reported to the Board at recent meetings that there is no provision for the Board to access Occupational Health services as the new Highland Council agreement excludes the VJB. The Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager at the Highland Council is now giving assistance to allow the VJB to join with The Highland Council's provider on the same terms and costs.

<b>7. Recommendation</b>
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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: 10 June 2024

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