

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

NOVEMBER 2013

DEPARTMENTAL REPORT

1. **GENERAL**

The main business of the department since the Board last met has been concerned with the continued preparations for various significant electoral events, disposal of rating revaluation appeals and maintenance of the valuation roll and council tax list. These matters are dealt with in greater detail below.

2. **ELECTORAL REGISTRATION**

The “refresh” of signatures associated with absent voting commenced on 1 August in accordance with the statutory timetable. Generally there is a requirement to renew signature details every five years. However, in light of the busy electoral calendar in 2014 and early 2015, legislative action was taken to bring forward the refresh that would have taken place in January 2014 and January 2015. Invitations were sent to approximately 16,000 electors who were registered to vote by post inviting them to provide a fresh sample of their signature. The regime is prescriptive requiring a reminder to be sent after three weeks and if no duly completed reply has been received, then the postal vote fell to be cancelled on 12 September. A total of 1777 electors have been advised that their postal vote has been cancelled and they have all been offered the opportunity to make a fresh application. Failure to refresh a signature results in cancellation of the absent voting arrangement but does not lead to removal from the register.

So far as the annual canvass is concerned, forms were issued on 8 October. This represented a slight delay from the intended date of issue of 1 October. This was due to a software update that was required in order to correctly prepopulate the young person’s canvass forms with the names of young voters who will be eligible to vote in the referendum on 18 September. This short delay did not contravene the statutory timescale. The return rate for the annual canvass indicates an improvement on recent years. The revised register will be published on 10 March.

Two local government by-elections have been called, one in Ward 4, Landward Caithness on 28 November and the other in Ward 10, Black Isle on 19 December. Arrangements are being made for these elections in conjunction with the Returning Officer.

In light of the occurrence of a European election on 22 May 2014, an exercise will be undertaken in January to establish whether or not relevant European citizens wish to vote in Scotland or in their native country in May.

Preparatory work associated with the introduction of individual electoral registration continues with the “confirmation dry run” having been carried out during the early part of August. The results of this process will be used to project the numbers of various types of form issue that will be required when the transfer to individual registration is triggered immediately after the Scottish referendum in 2014. Indications are that the level of matching was at or above that achieved for the country as a whole. In addition to this work, the process of upgrading software and systems in preparation for both the referendum and the introduction of individual electoral registration is proceeding by stages. Further careful planning will be required to program the remainder of this work around the statutory processes and the requirement for staff training. Detailed implementation plans are being compiled and updated to support the process of change through to 2015.

In connection with all of these activities ERO’s are co-operating with a view to co-ordinating publicity efforts to complement those of the Electoral Commission and to fill any gaps that are identified. One such initiative has been collaboration with Grampian, Tayside, Dundee and Orkney & Shetland ERO’s to promote a television advertising campaign this autumn.

3. **VALUATION FOR RATING**

During the last six months of the calendar year, the principal activity has been the clearance of revaluation rating appeals. Around 2400 appeals have been cited for hearings throughout this period and have now been closed. While most of these were resolved by negotiation, a number of substantive cases have been heard by the

Valuation Appeal Committee. There are a further eight days of hearings scheduled before the end of the calendar year. While we shall move into next year having resolved all of the revaluation appeals that were scheduled to be heard by the Local Valuation Appeal Panel, which represents the overwhelming majority of cases, there are a number which for a range of reasons, will be require to be cited for hearing by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland. In cases where there was a dispute as to where the appeals should properly be heard, that matter has now been resolved by the Lands Tribunal. The total number of 2010 revaluation appeals that have now been referred to be heard by the Lands Tribunal is now 106. It is to be expected that these appeals will be cited for hearing by the Tribunal during the course of the next calendar year.

Maintenance of the valuation roll continues in an orderly fashion. While there has been a slight reduction in time related performance, it should be possible to improve performance against this measure once the current appeal activity is concluded.

4. **COUNCIL TAX**

Maintenance of the Council Tax List continues as a matter of routine. It has proven possible to maintain time related performance over the last few months on slightly increased volumes.

5. **ADMINISTRATION**

As part of the continued updating of administrative policies which is being undertaken in a phased manner, Members are invited to consider the revised Relocation and Removal Policy under Item 9 on this agenda. The revised document is based on the current Highland Council policy.

Members are invited to adopt the revised policy with immediate effect.

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