

Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board held in Council Offices, Sandwick Road, Stornoway on Thursday, 21 May 2015, at 10.30 a.m.

Present

Representing The Highland Council Mrs H Carmichael
Dr I Cockburn (by video conference)
Mr A Duffy
Mr L Fraser
Mrs M Paterson
Mr D Bremner

Representing Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Mr J Mackay

Officials in attendance:

Mr W Gillies, Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer
Mrs F Wood, Finance Manager, Treasurer's Office (by video conference)
Mr J Batchelor, Head of People and Performance, the Highland Council (by video conference)
Mr A MacInnes, Clerk's Office

Mrs H Carmichael in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Graham of the Highland Council and Mr A MacLeod, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

The Board **NOTED** that there were no declarations of interest expressed.

3. Minutes of Meeting of 28 January, 2015 Geàrr-chunntas Coinneamh 28 Faoilleach 2015

The Minutes of the Board Meeting of 28 January, 2015 had been circulated and were **APPROVED**.

4. Revenue Budget Monitoring Statement 2014/15 Aithris Sgrùdaidh a' Bhuidseit Teachd-a-Steach airson 2014/15

There had been circulated Report No VAL/9/15 dated 12 May, 2015 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer setting out the revenue monitoring position for the period to 31 March, 2015 and the projected year end position.

Members were advised that the figures shown for spend to date did not reflect all of the final transactions required to close down the accounts and this should not be regarded as the final position for 2014/15.

The projected year end underspend of £97k was a change from that projected at the last meeting of £50k. The reason for the increase in the net underspend was the receipt of income from the Scottish Government of £52k as a result of additional compensation for expenditure incurred for holding the Scottish Referendum. There had also been a significant underspend in Salaries (including NI, superannuation and overtime) of £106k, which was largely due to vacancies in valuation posts together with savings as a consequence of the senior staff review. There had also been a big underspend on postages which was as a result of the uncertainties of what would be required for Individual Electoral Registration and not as many notices had been sent out as had been anticipated.

The Board was able to maintain a reserve fund of 5% of its revenue budget, and this was now at its maximum limit and therefore the final underspend on the accounts would be reimbursed to the constituent authorities.

The Finance Manager reported that it was anticipated that the final underspend on the accounts would be in the region of £75k. The draft final accounts would be submitted to the External Auditor by the end of May, 2015.

In response to questions, the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer confirmed that:

- In relation to Property costs, these were currently overspent by £28k due to the backdating of rent payments to the Highland Council for a period of five years.
- In relation to the overspend in other staff costs, this was largely overtime in relation to Individual Electoral Registration and the Scottish Referendum.

The Board **NOTED** the contents of the report.

5. Departmental Report Aithisg Roinneil

There had been circulated Report No VAL/10/15 dated 11 May, 2015 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer which outlined the main business of the office of the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer since the last meeting of the Board. The report, in summary, outlined progress with Electoral Registration, in particular preparations for the UK Parliamentary General Election. There had been two sittings of the Valuation Appeal Committee, both in respect of Council Tax, and general maintenance of the Valuation Roll and Council Tax list and continued throughout this period.

In speaking to the report, the Assessor and ERO highlighted that the processes required to provide the necessary environment for the General Election were completed successfully, however this was only achieved through staff working an extraordinary number of additional hours of overtime along with assistance from technical staff in the organisation. However the electoral IT system performance remained a serious issue which had to be addressed. This had been a great burden on staff in carrying out their job.

The processes required for individual electoral registration were significantly more complex, however the number of clerical errors that required correction in the

lead up to the General Election was only 12, out of an electorate of over 200,000. This was a significant achievement.

The Convenor on behalf of the Board, asked that Members appreciation be passed onto staff for all their hard work and willingness to undertake overtime in order to complete the processes required for the General Election.

Continuing, it was advised that the next phase of work for the valuation sections related to the 2017 Revaluation. However, this task was largely required to be completed by the autumn of 2016. This was a significant task as approximately 18,000 commercial properties had to be revalued.

In relation to a potential change in Government policy in relation to Council Tax, there was currently a consultation exercise on this and the outcome was awaited.

Also, in common with other Local Authorities in Scotland, the Assessor and ERO had received an instruction to comply with providing a Data Management Plan in regard to the Public Records Scotland Act by September, 2015. It was advised that work on this would be carried out over the summer months. While the aims of a Data Management Plan may not be possible to be delivered all at once, it was essential that a detailed plan was made of how we expect to move to a position of whereby all the data that is held, is held in accordance with best practice. There may be resource implications as a result of measures to be taken to comply with the plan.

Thereafter the Board **NOTED:-**

i the recent activities of the department as set out in the report; and

ii that Members appreciation would be passed onto staff for all their hard work and willingness to undertake overtime in order to complete the processes required for the General Election.

6. Departmental Policy Reviews **Ath-sgrùdaidhean Poileasaidh Roinneil**

At its meeting held on 21 November 2013, the Board noted a verbal update by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer setting out a proposed work programme of future Board business, during which he advised that a number of departmental policies, in particular personnel policies, would be brought to the Board for review.

i Policy and Guidance for Preventing Violence at Work **Poileasaidh agus Stiùireadh airson Casg a Chur air Fòirneart aig an Obair**

There had been circulated for approval Report No VAL/11/15 dated 21 May, 2015 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer which referred to the Policy and Guidance for Preventing Violence at Work, which mirrored that of the existing Highland Council policy.

It was explained that the policy aimed to prevent violence at work but was not primarily directed at internal violence against members of staff, as the Board's Harassment Policy would be expected to deal with this, but dealt with risks associated with contact with members of the public. However, the Board were reassured that it was very rare for staff to find themselves in the position whereby

they felt threatened in any way. The policy was in line with good practice to ensure that we were catering for the health, safety and wellbeing of staff. The policy covered physical violence and verbal abuse. The purpose of the policy was to alert members of staff going out to a property, where there has been a history of an incident to enable them to reduce this risk.

It was advised that staff did go out on their own more often than they went out with other members of staff. In terms of canvassing staff, they had strict instructions not to enter people's houses. However survey staff had to enter premises to carry out their duties. It was being investigated what devices could be provided to staff for the office to monitor where they were and for the member of staff to alert the office at the push of a button if they were in some difficulty. The comment was made that it was now possible to track the location of people through the use of mobile phone technology.

The Board's Personnel Adviser confirmed that violence against staff was very rare, but that it was important to have arrangements in place to record incidents and carry out risk assessments, so that management could take the appropriate action to safeguard employees health and safety.

In response to questions, it was advised that the aim of the policy was to deal with abusive or threatening behaviour. A risk of violence marker was not attributing blame, but recorded the fact that a member of staff felt threatened. It was important that staff views were taken on board and for Senior Management to take the appropriate action. It was also the intention to submit to a future meeting of the Board an 'Unacceptable Behaviour Policy'. This would deal with situations where someone was being abusive, but not threatening.

In terms of the Policy, the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer referred to the following suggested amendments to it for Members consideration:-

Paragraph 8.1 - second line - delete 'Highland Council colleagues' and replace with 'colleagues in Constituent Councils';

Paragraph 14.1 – the first sentence be changed to read ' A list of marked addresses will be maintained by the Assessors central administration team and Constituent Authorities shall be advised.'

Paragraph 14.2 – third line – delete words ' contact Highland Council to'

Paragraph 16.1 – third line – delete words 'Highland Council' and replace with 'the Constituent Councils'.

Appendix 2, second last paragraph – the option of writing to the Assessor to be added.

The Board **APPROVED** the Policy and Guidance for Preventing Violence at Work, subject to the amendments as detailed above being included.

ii Policy on the use of Display Screen Equipment

Poileasaidh mu chleachdadh Acfhainn Sgrion Taisbeanaidh

There had been circulated for approval Report No VAL/12/15 dated 21 May, 2015 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer relating to a Policy on the Use of Display Screen Equipment which mirrored that of the existing Highland Council

policy. It explained what was good practice in terms of health and safety in the use of Display Screen Equipment and measures that should be put in place to minimise any risks to employees

In relation to the section of the policy relating to Procedures for Dealing with Health and Safety Issues, a comment was made that in accordance with the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations the employer should provide a display screen equipment workstation checklist for employees to use. The Board's Personnel Adviser advised that there was an e-learning training course that all employees were to use in relation to how they set up their equipment, but it would be checked if any further amendment was required to the Board's policy on this matter.

The Board:-

- i **APPROVED** the Policy on the use of Display Screen Equipment; and
- ii **AGREED** that it would be checked if an amendment to the Policy was required in relation to the provision of a display screen equipment workstation checklist.

**iii Long Service Award
Duais airson Seirbheis Fhada**

There had been circulated Report No VAL/13/15 dated 21 May, 2015 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer which was an updated version of the Joint Board's policy on long service awards which applies to all full and part-time staff.

It was queried if the Long Service Award would still apply for employees who moved between constituent authorities and the Valuation Board. It was confirmed that this was covered by the constituent authorities so that employees who moved, their service would transfer with them.

The Board **APPROVED** the updated Long Service Award Policy.

**iv Stress Management Policy
Poileasaidh Rianachd Cudrom Intinn**

There had been circulated Report No. VAL/14/15 dated 21 May, 2015 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer which referred to the Stress Management Policy.

Members were advised that this was an update to the existing policy on stress management, which mirrored current Highland Council policy. It recognised that stress does occur in the workplace. It recognises the employers duties and responsibilities to put in measures to alleviate pressures and stress on employees for their health and safety. The policy identified the sort of things that can exist in an organisation that can cause stress, and therefore allowed measures to be taken to avoid these situations arising. The policy detailed the management interventions that should take place when stress is identified and the measures to be taken by managers to avoid stress in the workplace.

In terms of recruitment it was queried what would happen in a situation where people had issues such as post traumatic stress disorder. The Board's Personnel Adviser advised that in such situations Occupational Health advice

would be sought in terms of their capability for the job. However as part of the recruitment process people should be informed of the pressures in the job and if the job was likely to be stressful.

It was queried what the effect had been on staff of the additional hours overtime over the last year. In response, the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer advised that the working environment that staff had been under over the past year and put considerable pressure on staff. On the whole staff had dealt with this very well. Management had done all that they could to encourage staff to take breaks when they have seen pressure build on individuals and encouraged staff to take time off and not work additional hours where they see that overtime was having an adverse effect.

The Board **APPROVED** the updated Stress Management Policy.

7. Equalities Mainstreaming and Equalities Outcomes Progress Report Aithisg Adhartais Àbhaisteachadh Co-ionannachd agus Builean Co-ionannachd

There had been circulated Report No. VAL/15/15 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer relating to a progress report on Equalities Mainstreaming and Equalities Outcomes. There was a legal requirement to detail the Board's equalities mainstreaming and equalities outcomes. The report detailed the equalities outcomes and progress made towards achieving those outcomes.

In discussion, it was queried if Comhairle nan Eilean Siar were corporate members of the Plain English Campaign. It was understood that they were not but this would be checked.

It was advised that there had been a reduction in the gender pay gap across male and female employees. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission had set out a standard way of reporting gender pay gap data and therefore corrections to the calculations of gender pay gap data detailed in Appendix 3 of the report required to be made. The data should therefore read - combined gap - 39%; Full time gap - 40%; Part-time gap - 35%. The text contained in the Appendix also required to be changed in order to explain how these figures were arrived at. The following wording was suggested:- "It is calculated by expressing the average female hourly pay rate as a percentage of the average male hourly pay rate. The gap is the difference between that and 100%." The Board approved these changes.

It was advised that as the Board was a small employer with a relatively small number of employees, the gender pay gap reflected the traditional structure in place. To put this in perspective, the Highland Council had carried out a gender pay gap audit and the combined gap for Highland Council was plus 16.5%, compared to the Valuation Joint Board combined gap of 39%. To close this large gap was a generational issue where there was a small turnover of staff. However progress, albeit small, was being made.

The Board **NOTED** the contents of the report and **AGREED** the changes to Appendix 3 of the report 'Gender Pay Gap Data as at 31 March, 2015' as detailed above.

8. Exclusion of the Public

The Board **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 6 and 10 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

9. Risk Profile Review

Ath-sgrùdadh air Geàrr-thuaisgeul Cunnairt

At its meeting held on 1 May 2014, the Board agreed to consider the Risk Profile on an annual basis, or in the event of any update/addition to the Profile.

There had been circulated to Members only Report No VAL/16/15 dated 12 May, 2015 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer comprising updated risk profile that forms part of the governance arrangements. The Risk Profile had been changed to reflect an increased risk.

In terms of the increased risk, it was queried if a more detailed look at the electoral IT systems required to be undertaken in conjunction with other Assessors and Electoral Registration Officers. It was confirmed that this was the case and there was a need to look at alternatives or how the IT system can be improved. There had been enquiries about other software systems and this was ongoing work. The Board gave their support to these investigations being carried out.

It was reported that there had been an initial indication of grant from Central Government with regard to ongoing expenditure on Individual Electoral Registration. An update on discussions with Central Government on the grant allocation may be available for the next meeting.

In terms of business continuity of electoral registration software, business continuity measures were in place in order to manage the risk of company failure.

In terms of fire prevention, it was advised that fire extinguisher sprinkler kits were now available. The Scottish Government were promoting these for domestic properties. It was advised that the Assessor's Offices in Moray House, Inverness had recently been refurbished by the owner and a complete fire protection system had been installed.

In terms of staff being on a survey alone, the comment was made that some form of self defence training might be appropriate for staff. Also, in terms of freedom of information requests, the Board might wish to consider implementing a charge for the provision of information. It was advised that freedom of information requests was not a significant issue at present, but there was potential for it to be a significant risk in terms of resources available to deal with such requests.

Reference was also made to the recruitment of two professional members of staff. These vacant posts had been re-advertised but no further applications had been received. There was a potential risk if no appointments could be made to these posts, but efforts to fill them would continue.

The Board:-

i **NOTED** the updated Risk Profile; and

ii **APPROVED** the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer making enquiries about other electoral IT systems in conjunction with other Assessors and Electoral Registration Officers and noted that there would be a report back on this to a future meeting.

The meeting ended at 12.30 p.m.