

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

18 September 2020

Agenda Item	5
Report No	VAL/1/20

Revenue Monitoring Report Period to 31 August 2020

Report by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer

Summary

This report sets out the revenue monitoring position of the Board for the period to 31 August and the projected year end position.

CURRENT POSITION

The attached monitoring statement shows the position for the period to 31 August 2020. Net expenditure to date is £1.092m and represents 33% of the annual budget of £3.340m.

YEAR-END PROJECTION

At this point in the year, the overall outturn is expected to be an underspend of £0.255m, however, as in previous years, this projection is sensitive to the eventual outturn of the annual electoral canvass. With restrictions and changes to working practices placed on the Assessor due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government guidance on re-opening of offices in September may see some changes to working practices again with some restrictions lifted. At present, all staff are working from home and it is not clear at present when a full return to the office may be possible. Some uncertainty exists in relation to contingencies that may be necessary in relation to preparation for the Scottish Parliamentary Elections and other implications of a sustained period of home working.

Staff costs

Salaries including NI, superannuation and overtime

Salary costs indicate an underspend of £0.244m, largely through the management of staff vacancies and difficulties experienced in recruiting. Covid-19 restrictions make recruiting and necessary staff training difficult and the level of remuneration for certain posts would appear to be adversely affecting the level of interest. The Electoral Registration Officer has been unable to carry out doorstep visits for completion of outstanding invitation to register forms to date and this contributes to the staffing underspend.

A vacant Valuer post has recently been advertised with other vacancies on hold at present.

These vacancies are noted below:

- Senior Valuer
- Field Officer / Senior Technical Assistant x 2
- Administrative Assistant
- Clerical Assistant / Typist

In addition, there are a number of posts relating to Scottish Government Barclay funding that remain vacant.

Travel and subsistence

An underspend of £0.034m is estimated under this budget heading. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, valuation and technical staff have been unable to carry out survey visits and electoral canvassers have been unable to carry out doorstep visits. The annual canvass of electors has not been cancelled and the Electoral Registration Officer will follow Scottish Government and Health & Safety guidance on commencement of doorstep visits.

Property costs

Heating, Lighting and Cleaning

An underspend has been projected on heating and lighting costs as staff continue to work from home. Cleaning has continued to be carried out in Dingwall, Wick and Stornoway on a daily basis as staff are visiting these offices on a regular basis. Daily cleaning is being commenced again in Inverness from the beginning of September. A deep clean of the Inverness Office has recently been carried out.

Other property costs

An estimate of £2,500 to £3,500 has been provided by the Clerk of Works at Highland Council to redecorate and re-carpet the main office area in the Board's Wick Office. It has been suggested that this work is carried out whilst staff are working from home. Other costs are anticipated to assist with the moving of furniture and secure cabinets/safes.

With the pending return to the office environment, the Assessor has been following Scottish Government guidance with regard to providing hand sanitisers in all offices and costs have been incurred from joiners installing cleaning stations. As the Inverness Office is a shared facility, the Assessor has arranged to restrict access to toilets on the first floor to Board staff only. This work will incur costs from various tradesmen.

Administrative Costs

Printing, stationery and photocopying

As staff are currently working from home, there has been a reduction in spend on stationery and printing costs however a return to the office by some staff may see an increase in expenditure under this budget heading in the coming months.

Postages

Expenditure on postages for the period to date would indicate an underspend however, the annual canvass of electors commenced later than usual due to migration to a new electoral management system in April. The bulk of the expenditure will therefore fall within the second half of the year.

A review of printing and postage provision has been undertaken. Although savings and improved working practices have been identified, the Assessor has been unable to make full use of the saving options available due to ICT restrictions. It is anticipated that these issues can be resolved in the coming weeks with an update provided to the Board at their meeting in November.

Legal Expenses

While the period to date indicates zero expenditure, some legal work has been incurred but has not yet been invoiced. The Valuation Appeal Committee are in the process of citing approaching one thousand material change of circumstance appeals in relation to Covid-19 which are likely to require legal advice and/or representation.

Other Administration Costs

Other administration costs are currently showing a negative in the actuals period to date due to an Audit Scotland invoice that was accrued, which still needs to be received and processed for payment.

Transport Costs

As the Assessor has been following Scottish Government guidance in relation to Covid-19, meetings that would normally have been held across Scotland with the Scottish Assessors Association and other stakeholders, have been carried out by Teams meetings reducing the requirement for hire cars. This position may change once restrictions have been lifted.

Supplies and Services

Computer charges

Payments for computer charges are projected as being within budget however, annual billing from Wipro has not been processed. Due to Covid-19 the ERO has made provision for canvass forms to be scanned using an external scanning bureau. There are some initial set-up fees and costs for scanning of returns, but under the new canvass reform legislation, the expected number of returns has significantly reduced. The use of a scanning bureau may be extended to include other electoral forms such as invitations to register and absent vote forms for contingency planning for the Scottish Parliamentary election in May 2021.

Valuation Appeal Committee Expenses

There is uncertainty relating to the costs associated with Valuation Appeal hearings scheduled throughout the current financial year. The actuals to date for Valuation Appeal hearings would appear to show a very small overspend at this point in the year however, an

invoice £0.019m for work carried out to the end of August has still to be paid. If this level of expenditure were to continue it would result in a significant overspend. As previously reported, the Assessor has no control over this budget head.

Income

IER funding from the Cabinet Office is lower than projected for 2020/21. It was initially estimated that an allocation of £0.030m would be received however, under canvass reform legislation changes, the allocation has been reduced to £0.025m. This income has still to be received from the Cabinet Office and payment is expected in the next month.

Whilst the actuals to date show income received of £0.050m, some work was carried out by the EMS supplier to incorporate recent franchise changes, namely prisoner voting and extending the franchise for foreign nationals to allow them to vote at Scottish elections. This income has been offset by reimbursement of costs to the EMS supplier.

Recommendation

The Board is invited to comment and otherwise note the content of this report.

Designation: Assessor and ERO

Date: 7 September 2020

Author: Bill Gillies

Assessor & ERO

HIGHLAND & WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

**REVENUE BUDGET 2020/21
MONITORING STATEMENT FOR THE PERIOD ENDED 31 August 2020**

Heading	Period to date		Annual Estimated		Year End Estimated variance £000
	Budget £000	Actual £000	Budget £000	outturn £000	
Staff costs					
Salaries including NI, superann and overtime	918	783	2,203	1,959	(244)
Travel and subsistence	30	8	72	38	(34)
Other staff costs	19	15	45	45	0
	967	806	2,320	2,042	(278)
Property costs					
Heating, lighting and cleaning	20	3	47	38	(9)
Rent, rates and water	116	137	198	198	0
Other property costs	3	3	7	12	5
	139	143	252	248	(4)
Administrative costs					
Printing, stationery and photocopying	11	(0)	26	22	(4)
Postages	54	7	130	130	0
Telephone and fax costs	5	0	12	12	0
Advertising	1	0	2	2	0
Legal expenses	12	(0)	30	30	0
Other administration costs	4	(2)	9	9	0
	87	5	209	205	(4)
Apportioned Costs					
Central service support	0	0	60	60	0
Transport costs	2	0	5	1	(4)
Supplies and services					
Computer charges	158	128	380	380	0
	158	128	380	380	0
Board expenses	4	0	10	10	0
Valuation Appeal Committee expenses	58	60	139	170	31
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	1,415	1,142	3,375	3,116	(259)
Income	(14)	(50)	(35)	(31)	4
NET EXPENDITURE	1,401	1,092	3,340	3,085	(255)
	-	1,081	0		