

Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board

Minutes of Meeting of the Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board held in Council Headquarters, Inverness on Friday 22 November, 2019 at 10.30 a.m.

Present:

Representing The Highland Council:

Mr L Fraser
Mr J Gray
Mrs P Munro
Mrs M Paterson

Representing Comhairle nan Eilean Siar:

Mr J Mackay (by vc)
Mr A MacLeod

In attendance:

Mr W Gillies, Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer
Mr F Finlayson, Assistant Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer
Ms L Denovan, Treasurer
Ms C Stachan, Accountant, Treasurer's Office
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Clerk's Office

Mr J Gray in the Chair

Business

**1. Apologies
Leisgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Graham and Mr A MacKinnon.

**2. Declarations of Interest
Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Minutes of Meetings
Geàrr-chunntas Coinneamh**

The Minutes of Meeting of 12 September, 2019 were **APPROVED**.

**4. Matters Arising from the Minutes
Gnothaichean Ag Èirigh on Gheàrr-chunntas**

Arising from the Minutes the following matters were raised:-

i Membership – it was **NOTED** that Mrs P Munro was standing down from membership of the Board and was to be replaced by Mr K Gowans. This change would require formal approval by The Highland Council at their meeting in December, 2019.

ii Desktop Refresh – it was **NOTED** that a letter of support from the Board, requesting improvements be made in the computing environment for the Assessor and Electoral Registration staff, had been drafted and would be sent by the Clerk to the Board after the meeting.

5. Revenue Budget Monitoring Statement 2019/20 Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseit Teachd-a-Steach 2019/20

There was circulated Report No VAL/17/19 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer which set out the revenue monitoring position of the Board for the period to 31 October, 2019 and the projected year end position.

It was reported that the overall outturn was expected to be an underspend of £126k, however, as in previous years, this projection was sensitive to the eventual outturn of the annual electoral canvass. Staff costs indicated an underspend, largely through the management of staff vacancies and difficulties experienced in recruitment. There was uncertainty relating to the costs associated with Valuation Appeal hearings scheduled throughout the current financial year and the requirement for legal counsel. Further, Individual Electoral Reform funding from the Cabinet Office was higher than projected for 2019/20. Also, maintenance work was scheduled to be carried out in the Wick Office and payments for computer charges were projected as being within budget.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Staff costs indicated an underspend of £103k, largely due to the management of staff vacancies throughout the year. Trainee Valuer and Clerical Assistant posts were in the process of being advertised and it was hoped that once appointments had been made, new staff should be in post by January, 2020 for the majority of positions. However, even if these posts are filled it was still anticipated there would be an underspend in staff costs at the end of the financial year.
- It was queried if there would be any additional Government financial support for the two additional Elections in 2020. It was advised that the Electoral Registration Officer would not receive any additional resources for undertaking work on Elections this year as this work was classed by the Government as business as usual on the electoral process. On average there was one Election a year.

Thereafter, the Board **NOTED** the contents of the report.

6. Departmental Report Aithisg Roinneil

There was circulated Report No VAL/18/19 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.

It was reported that the main business since the last meeting had been associated with the disposal of revaluation appeals, the annual electoral canvass and the maintenance of the Valuation Roll and Council Tax lists. Recent activity had also involved preparation for the General Election.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- In terms of the UK General Election on 12 December 2019, there had been a significant increase in the number of applications to register to vote and processing this large amount of applications was challenging for staff. However, it was expected that most of the applications would be from people who had already been registered. This was a result of the online electoral registration system not having the facility to allow people to check if they were registered.
- It was welcomed that the Desktop refresh had commenced. A program had been agreed for replacement to take place during November and December. Key electoral staff were being targeted to receive the first batch of devices. However, Wipro, in a letter to them from the Board, were being urged that the remainder of the refresh is completed without further delay to ensure that the computing environment can properly assist the Assessor in the effective delivery of his statutory functions.
- A meeting had taken place with The Highland Council to discuss the proposed rent review for the Wick Office. The original proposal of £14,500 per annum had now been withdrawn, along with the application of any backdated element. A new proposal had now been received for a rent of £7,700 to take effect from 4 June, 2020.
- Concern was expressed that the Wick Office was not fit for purpose. It was an old building, not fully double glazed, inadequate heating system etc. It was explained that it would be for the Board to decide if the Assessor should seek alternative modern Offices in Wick at a higher cost or whether the existing offices could be improved to a satisfactory standard. A view was expressed that the current offices were not up to standard and that staff deserved a better standard of accommodation. It was suggested that a full business case be undertaken to assess what it would cost to upgrade the current Wick Office compared to moving to alternative modern accommodation.
- In relation to staffing, a further attempt would be made to recruit qualified valuation staff. The recruitment of further trainee valuers would also take place this month. An update was also provided in relation to staffing within the Administration section.
- Reference was made to a comment at the last meeting whereby the total rateable value of the valuation roll had decreased by circa £4m from 2017/18 to 2018/19 despite the number of entries in the valuation roll increasing. It was explained that the decrease in valuation was largely as a consequence of appeal resolution.

Thereafter, the Board:-

- NOTED** the recent activities of the Department as set out in the report; and
- AGREED** that a Business Case be undertaken on the Wick Office to assess what it would cost to upgrade the accommodation compared to moving staff to alternative modern accommodation in Wick.

7. Code of Corporate Governance 2019/20

There was circulated Report No. VAL/19/19 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.

The Board **APPROVED** the Code of Corporate Governance 2019/20.

8. Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace Policy

There was circulated Report No. VAL/20/19 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.

The Board **APPROVED** the Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace Policy.

9. Indemnity for Employees Policy

There was circulated Report No. VAL/21/19 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.

The Board **APPROVED** the Indemnity for Employees Policy.

10. Personal Accident Insurance Policy

There was circulated Report No. VAL/22/19 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.

The Board **APPROVED** the Personal Accident Insurance Policy.

11. Redeployment and Redundancy Policy

There was circulated Report No. VAL/23/19 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.

The Board **APPROVED** the Redeployment and Redundancy Policy.

12. Display Screen Equipment Policy and Guidance

There was circulated Report No. VAL/24/19 by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.

The Board **APPROVED** the Display Screen Equipment Policy and Guidance.

13. Dates of Meetings 2020 Cinn-latha Choinneamhan 2020

The Board **AGREED** the following meeting dates for 2020:-

Friday, 24 January at 10.30a.m.

Friday, 19 June at 10.30a.m. (*meeting to be held in Stornoway*)

Friday, 18 September at 10.30a.m.

Friday, 20 November at 10.30 a.m.

14. Appointment of Convener

The Board, at their meeting held on 27 June 2017, agreed that Mr J Gray and Mr K Gowans would each serve equal terms in the post of Convener until the Local Government Election on 5 May, 2022. Mr J Gray was to serve the initial term until 30 November, 2019.

The Board were therefore invited to appoint to the post of Convener for the remaining term until 5 May, 2022.

In terms of the Valuation Joint Boards (Scotland) Order 1995, the Convener & Depute Convener shall not, at any time, be Members of the same constituent authority. Therefore, the Convener would require to be selected from the Highland Council membership on the Board.

Mrs P Munro, moved that this item be deferred until the next meeting so that there were more Members in attendance, but there was no seconder, so the Motion was dropped.

Thereafter, nominations were sought for the post of Convener for the remaining term until 5 May, 2022.

Mrs M Paterson, seconded by Mr J MacKay, moved that Mr J Gray be appointed Convener.

There being no other nominations, Mr J Gray was duly appointed Convener for the remaining term until 5 May, 2022.

The meeting concluded at 11.50 a.m.