

AYRSHIRE VALUATION JOINT BOARD

Minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2020 at 3.00pm within
County Buildings, Wellington Square, Ayr

Item 1 - Sederunt

- Present: Councillor John McFadzean (Chair).
- Attended remotely
East Ayrshire: Councillors: McKay, McMahon and Todd.
- Attended remotely
North Ayrshire: Councillors: Reid and Glover.
- Attended remotely
South Ayrshire: Councillors: A Campbell, I Campbell, Cullen, Dowey and Grant.
- In Attendance: Helen McPhee, Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO); Tim Baulk, Head of Finance and ICT (SAC); Tom Simpson, Service Lead - Corporate Accounting (SAC); Wynne Carlaw, Service Lead – Democratic Governance (SAC) (Clerk); and Janice McClure, Committee Services Lead Officer (SAC).
- Attending Remotely: John McConville, Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO; Harry McCormick, Principal IT and Admin Development Officer; Laura Miller, Chief Internal Auditor (SAC); and Coenraad Balfort, Deloitte LLP.
- Apologies: Councillors: Jenkins, McMahon and Todd – East Ayrshire Council
Councillors: Easdale, George and McClung – North Ayrshire Council

Item 1 – Sederunt

As detailed above.

Item 2- Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest by Members in terms of the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

Item 3 – Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting of the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board (the Board) held on 21 August 2020 was submitted.

Decided: to approve the Minutes of the Board meeting held on 21 August 2020. Proposed by Councillor Grant and Seconded by Councillor Cullen.

Item 4 – Matters Arising

There were no matters arising from the Minutes of the meeting held on 21 August 2020.

Item 5 – Appointment of Vice-Chair

The Chair invited nominations for the appointment of Vice-Chair of the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board.

Decided: unanimously, to appoint Councillor Cullen as Vice-Chair of the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board.

Item 6 – Internal Audit Annual Report 2019/20 and Internal Audit Plan 2020/21 – 2022/23

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 19 May 2020 by the Chief Internal Auditor presenting the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board (AVJB) annual report on the Internal Audit activity during 2019/20 (including an independent opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the governance, risk management and internal control systems for the year ended 31 March 2020); and presenting the Internal Audit Plans for 2020/21 to 2022/23.

The Board heard the Chief Internal Auditor advise that the overall audit findings had shown that controls were in place and operating effectively with only low risk areas for improvement; and amendments were proposed to the internal audit plan for 2020/21 due to slippage in the implementation of the new core system.

Having heard a Board Member question wording in the Appendix in relation to Covid-19, the Chief Internal Auditor advised that the report was written before the full impact of the pandemic was known and there was a need to look at how organisations responded to the pandemic.

Decided:

- (1) to note the annual report and statement on internal controls for 2019/20; and
- (2) to approve the proposed changes to the Strategic Internal Audit Plan for 2020/21 – 2022/23.

Item 7 – Final Report on the 2019/20 Audit

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 11 September 2020 by the Treasurer to the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board (AVJB) requesting that the Board consider the External Auditor's final report on the 2019/20 Audit.

Coenraad Balfourt, Deloitte LLP outlined the main findings and key messages in the report including the impact Covid-19 had on preparing valuations of the Board's estate; that the quality indicators were all graded as "mature" which was very positive during such a difficult year; and that there were no new action points this year within the Action Plan.

Decided: to accept the contents of Deloitte LLP's Final Audit Report.

Item 8 – Annual Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2020

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 11 September 2020 by the Treasurer to the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board (AVJB) outlining the Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020, together with the proposed independent auditor's report.

The Service Lead – Corporate Accounting took the Board through the main points in the Accounts; referred to the uncertainties created by the Covid-19 pandemic on the valuation of the Board's property; and the impact on the pension fund valuation of recent Court judgements and advised that the uncorrected misstatement in relation to IAS 19 pension valuation was not considered material by the auditor but was above their reporting threshold.

Decided:

- (1) to approve the Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020;
- (2) to authorise the Chair, the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer and the Treasurer to sign and issue the Annual Accounts by 30 September 2020; and
- (3) to note that the accumulated General Fund surplus as at 31 March 2020 of £532,930 would be utilised to fund expenditure in future years, as previously approved by the Board.

Item 9 – Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2020/21 – Position Statement at 31 July 2020

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 9 September 2020 by the Treasurer to the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board (AVJB) advising of income and expenditure for the period ended 31 July 2020 (monitoring period 4) as compared with the approved Revenue Budget.

The Service Lead – Corporate Accounting referred to the table summarising the position with the Revenue Budget and the underspend within this table and the reasons for this underspend; and advised of the Individual Electoral Registration (IER) grant funding of £9,000 which had been granted for this financial year which would contribute to postage and staff costs associated with IER.

Decided: to approve the report.

Item 10 – Annual Report 2019-20

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 7 September 2020 by the Assessor and ERO reflecting on 2019/20; and highlighting changes affecting the future direction of the Joint Board.

The Assessor and ERO advised of progress made during 2019/20 and confirmed that there was no proposal to change the current targets.

Decided:

- (1) to note the contents of the report;
- (2) to note the potential impact of the Barclay Review; and
- (3) to agree the suggested targets for 2020/21.

Item 11 – Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board’s Governance and Performance Framework

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 7 September 2020 by the Assessor and ERO seeking approval of the revised Framework; and inviting the Board to review the Framework and use this as a reference to the report on Delivering Good Governance.

Decided: to agree the Framework, following review.

Item 12 – Valuation and Performance

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 3 September 2020 by the Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO advising on the progress achieved in Valuation and Council Tax for the financial year 2019/20; and providing an update to the ongoing reporting of performance during the first five months of the new financial year 2020/21,

The Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO advised of the large number of referrals to the Lands Tribunal for Scotland which were currently being processed; outlined that the amendment to the Appeal Disposal Timetable which would allow all 2017 Revaluation Appeals to be dealt with by 30 December 2021 was a welcomed extension of time; and referred to the Revaluation 2022, where the Scottish Government had a proposal to delay it until 2023.

Following a question from a Board Member on whether it was anticipated that the Valuation Appeal hearing would proceed in October 2020, the Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO advised that provisional dates had been agreed with the Ayrshire Valuation Appeal Panel and scheduled to be held in the Horizon Hotel with appropriate social distancing and PPE; and that appropriate procedures had been put in place for these hearings, however, the numbers attending would not be known until a week before the hearings.

Decided: to note the contents of the report.

Item 13 – Public Performance Report 2019/20

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 3 September 2020 by the Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO seeking approval of the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board Public Performance Report 2019/20.

The Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO advised that, following approval of this report, it would be made available to the public in the same format as last year’s report.

Decided: to approve the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board Public Performance Report 2019/20.

Item 14 – Delivering Good Governance – 2019/20 Assessment

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 7 September 2020 by the Assessor and ERO reporting on the completion of the Joint Board’s Annual Local Code of Delivering Good Governance for 2019/20; and inviting the Board to review the 2019/20 year-end assessment against the Board’s Governance and Performance Framework and its Corporate Plan.

The Assessor and ERO advised that this report was normally submitted earlier in the financial year, however, due to Covid-19 this has not been possible.

Decided: to agree the 2019/20 report, following review.

Item 15 – Electoral Registration

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 4 September 2020 by the Principal Admin and IT Development Officer providing an update on the position with regard to the Board's functions concerning Electoral Registration.

The Principal Admin and IT Development Officer advised that Appendix 1 of this report detailed the current activities of electoral registration; and outlined the changes to the electoral canvass due to Covid-19.

Following a question from a Board Member on whether there had been publicity to advise members of the public that they would be contacted via email and expected to respond via email for the Annual Electoral Canvass, the Principal Admin and IT Development Officer advised that the Communications Team of each Ayrshire authority had been promoting this through social media, the AVJB had advertised this on its website; and the Electoral Commission had carried out a nationwide campaign.

Following a comment from a Board Member that he had been contacted by members of the public who believed that the email was Spam, the Principal Admin and IT Development Officer advised that there had been a good response to the email and it was expected that numbers of responses would rise in future years.

Decided: to note the contents of the report.

Item 16 – Strategic Risk Register

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 7 September 2020 by the Assessor and ERO providing an update on the risks currently faced by the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board; and advising that the format of the register had changed to focus on strategic matters and, where appropriate, there would be project specific risk registers.

The Assessor and ERO referred to the good response rate to the canvass; and the data matching carried out.

Decided:

- (1) to note the significant impact the loss of direct IER funding from the Cabinet Office would have on the Board's financial resources if there was not significant changes to how the annual canvass was carried out;
- (2) to note the significant impact the move to three yearly revaluations and other changes to non-domestic rates would have on the Board's financial resources; and
- (3) to note the contents of the report.

Item 17 – Staffing

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 7 September 2020 by the Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO outlining the current staffing issues.

The Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO provided the Board with an update on staffing issues since the last Board meeting; advised that it was proving difficult to appoint qualified staff during these challenging times; and outlined that most staff were working from home, with absence levels continuing to be monitored, however, some staff continued to work from the office.

Decided:

- (1) to approve the closure of the office in the period between Christmas and New Year, subject to staff using their annual leave and/or flexi time; and
- (2) to note the contents of the remainder of the report.

Item 18 – Revised Communication Strategy

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 28 July 2020 by the Assessor and ERO presenting the Board's revised Communication Strategy.

The Assessor and ERO advised that, with the assistance of South Ayrshire Council's ICT Department who had supplied laptops, her staff had quickly adapted to working from home with some staff who had remained in the office to deal with canvassing being provided with PPE; and that she wished to move to a blended style of working with a rotation of staff being present in the office which would result in smaller office premises being required.

Following a question from a Board Member on whether Risk Assessments had been carried out on those staff working from home and whether they had been offered additional monies to pay for heating, electricity, etc, the Assessor and ERO advised that Risk Assessments had been carried out for all staff and that desks and chairs had been offered for their comfort; and that staff were presently happy to be working from home as they were not paying travelling costs, however, should working from home continue for some time, the possibility of paying staff additional monies for heating, electricity, etc could be examined.

Decided:

- (1) to approve the expansion of home/remote working over the coming twelve months;
- (2) to approve the Communication Strategy; and
- (2) to note the remaining content of the report.

Item 19 – AVJB Covid-19 Recovery Plan

There was submitted a report (circulated) of 3 September 2020 by the Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO advising of the Board's activities during Covid-19 lockdown; and seeking approval of key future actions to ensure a full recovery of all Board functions and activities.

The Head of Valuation Services and Assistant ERO referred to the activities in the Recovery Plan; outlined that these were recorded as low, medium or high priority; and advised that no inspections of non-domestic properties had taken place since 23 March 2020 as this was high risk, however, he was currently carrying out Risk Assessments for this and reviewing what PPE would be required for carrying out these surveys.

Decided:

- (1) to note the activities undertaken by staff since lockdown was introduced on 23 March 2020; and
- (2) to agree the proposed activities that would lead to the full restoration of all Board functions and activities.

Item 20 – Any Other Competent Business

A Board Member enquired why the Minutes of the previous meeting had not been published on the AVJB website; why the Chair and some Officers were in County Buildings for this meeting; and why some Board Members had been unable to join the previous meeting which had been held remotely.

The Chair then advised that he would seek guidance on why the Minutes of the previous meeting had not been published; that the Officers in attendance in County Buildings were socially distanced and adhering to guidance; and apologised to those Members who had been unable to access the previous meeting, however advised that all Officers were working under challenging circumstances.

The Clerk advised that she would liaise with Officers regarding why the Minutes of the previous meeting had not been published; and liaise with Officers in ICT regarding why some Members had been unable to access the meeting.

Decided: to note that the Clerk would report back to the Board Member on the issues raised.

Item 21 – Date and Time of Next Meeting

Decided: to note that the next meeting would be held on 13 January 2021.

The meeting ended at 4.00 pm