

INTERIM ASSESSOR'S PROGRESS REPORT TO THE LOTHIAN VALUATION JOINT BOARD

9th November 2020

1.0 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide members with an overview of current service delivery, priorities, risks and future direction.
- 1.2 It should be noted that the majority of staff remain working at home during current Covid restrictions. There are however a limited number of staff attending the office to deal with this year's canvass and the upcoming by-election taking place in Edinburgh on the 12th November.

2.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION – MAINTENANCE

- 2.1 Since the last progress report to the Board in September 2020 all maintenance tasks supporting the registration process have continued.
- 2.2 Key processing volumes reflecting the period August to October inclusive are shown below.

	Edinburgh	Midlothian	West Lothian	East Lothian	Totals
Additions	16,832	1,717	3,055	2,211	23,815
Deletions	24,297	2,423	4,840	2,874	34,434
Amendments	468	77	181	83	809

3.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION – HOUSEHOLD CANVASS 2020

- 3.1 The annual household canvass 2020 continues.
- 3.2 As reported at the last Board meeting the match process with Department of Work and Pension data in conjunction with a local data match to Council Taxpayer lists provided a householder match of 67%. This represented 295,478 households as matching and 128,101 as not.
- 3.3 E-communications have been sent to 139,098 households contained within this match, and who had previously agreed to be contacted in this fashion, asking they confirm the electors as still residing at the address, or provide new information. 68,824 responses have been provided as at 27th October. 170 electors have requested to unsubscribe from this type of communication.

- 3.4 The next stage of the new canvass process began on the 2nd September and involved the issue of Canvass Communication B (CCB) to those households who did not successfully pass the match process, 33% of households. 129,795 paper communications have been sent to date of which 58,359 were replied to online. A further 82,879 paper forms have been issued of which 4,429 have been returned as at 27th October.
- 3.7 This communication advises what action should be taken to ensure the registration details for that household are updated including the need to confirm if the details shown are correct. It is this group that shall receive follow up communications and door to door canvass activity for non-return of information. We are initiating phone canvass and email communication to avoid the requirement for door to door canvass where possible.
- 3.8 ERO's have been granted an extension to 1st February to publish their registers, if that is required, due to the current situation regarding Covid 19. However it is still my intention to publish on the 1st December as normal. The Board shall receive further progress updates on the new canvass process at future meetings including an assessment of the financial impact.

4.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION – LEGISLATION

- 4.1 Legislation extending the franchise to prisoners serving sentences of 12 months or less and foreign nationals residing in Scotland has now been enacted. To date I have received no applications from prisoners wishing to register.
- 4.2 Legislation has now been enacted with regard to the upcoming Scottish Government elections in respect of alteration to the current emergency proxy regulations that shall allow those electors following guidance on self-isolation to apply for an emergency proxy up to 5.00pm on polling day without attestation of their application. This had previously been enacted for Local Government elections.

5.0 ELECTORAL LEGISLATION – ELECTIONS

- 5.1 The scheduled by-election in West Lothian ward 4 Livingston South which had been postponed was rescheduled for the 5th November and subsequently postponed again. The new date for the election has yet to be decided.
- 5.2 The scheduled by election in Edinburgh ward 14 Duddingston / Craigentenny goes ahead on the 12th November.

6.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION ENGAGEMENT

- 6.1 Despite the current Covid restrictions I have continued to engage with unregistered electors in a number of ways.

Regarding the upcoming by-election in Edinburgh

- A mailshot to all potential electors within by-election ward inviting them to register through the gov.uk website prior to registration deadlines.
- Insert included in mailshot provided by City of Edinburgh Council Communications department relating to the safety measures in place when voting at the polling station.
- News item published on website highlighting key dates.
- Increased social media activity around important election dates, working in partnership with CEC's Communications department to amplify messaging.
- Information point set up at Brae House – the one student accommodation within the ward – to encourage voter registration in the student population.

Universities

- Web banners on Napier and Queen Margaret Universities Student Association websites;
- Advertising in various Freshers' Information publications;
- Students Association social media channels;
- Information point to promote By-Election at Brae House; and
- Securing agreements with the University of Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt University to take part in a voter registration campaign ahead of Scottish Parliamentary Elections.

Other

- Continued online promotion to increase Annual Household Canvass returns through the website and social media channels
- Working in partnership with ReAct to produce a video podcast promoting voter registration in refugee communities
- Working in partnership with Midlothian schools to produce a video presentation for school pupils – with the potential to disseminate to all schools across the 4 constituent councils.
- Issue of 'Invitation to Register' forms to all school pupils not yet registered scheduled for December 2020

7.0 VALUATION ROLL – MAINTENANCE

- 7.1 Since the last report to the Board, covering the period 31st August to 23rd October, 283 alterations have been made to the valuation roll with respect to running roll activities. These changes comprised 43 amendments to existing entries, 128 deletions, 112 inserts and over 3,000 name changes.

	Edinburgh	Midlothian	W. Lothian	E. Lothian	Total
Inserts	63	6	23	20	112
Deletions	107	3	11	7	128
Amendments	31	2	9	1	43

- 7.2 This represents about 70% of pre-Covid levels looking at the same period in 2019. This figure is an improvement on that reported at the previous board meeting and though it does cover a snapshot in time, and should be treated with some caution as to it representing a recovery in the property market, it is good to see.
- 7.3 Although restrictions on external survey remain in place, staff continue to undertake necessary actions in the majority of cases using plans and information provided in the form of photos, videos and any suitable and appropriate online resource.
- 7.4 It was hoped that limited external survey of property may have been able to resume since the last Board meeting. Unfortunately, due to the increased prevalence of Covid infections we are currently seeing, that has not been able to take place. I will continue to appraise this position on an ongoing basis taking account of Scottish Government advice and in consultation with staff and Trade Unions. However, it is unlikely external survey will be possible at least for the remainder of 2020.
- 7.5 Staff are continuing to provide assistance where appropriate to Councils in respect of business grant/relief schemes introduced during the pandemic though the number of enquiries we are receiving is reducing over time.

8.0 VALUATION ROLL – APPEALS

- 8.1 All outstanding 2017 Revaluation and Running Roll appeals, (2,040), were as required by legislation, cited for hearing by the Valuation Appeal Committee during June 2020. Of these c.700 Revaluation and c.150 Running Roll appeals remain outstanding. The inability to carry out external surveys and agents accessing files are two of the reasons for the delay in resolving these cases. A further 323 Running Roll appeals were cited during August for a hearing on 21st January 2021.
- 8.2 Notification was provided by Government on the 26th August 2020 of its intention to lay before Parliament the necessary amendments to The Valuation Timetable (Scotland) Order 1995 indicating an extension to the disposal timetable. These amendments have been implemented and the disposal date for appeals is now 31st December 2021.
- 8.3 This amendment Order covers in addition all running roll appeals (appeals that have been lodged against entries and changes to the Roll subsequent to a Revaluation) that have been received and remain outstanding at this time. This includes the 9,541 appeals lodged in 2020 citing the effects of the Covid pandemic as constituting a material change.
- 8.4 I have had several discussions with the secretary of the Local Valuation Appeal Committee. It is unlikely that any physical hearings will be held before March 2021 though that could change

should the Covid 19 situation improve. Discussions will take place in due course to programme all outstanding appeals but particularly in relation to Covid 19 appeals.

9.0 VALUATION ROLL – NDR REFORM

- 9.1 The Scottish Government recently made public its intention to delay the 2022 Revaluation to 2023 with a subsequent tone date of 1st April 2022. This change requires parliamentary approval. That being the case this is unlikely to be confirmed before January 2021. In the meantime, the SAA is still preparing for a revaluation in 2022 should it transpire that parliamentary approval is not granted.
- 9.2 Investigations in respect of the creation of the Valuation Service Team, part of the Transformation programme Phase 2, which involves the reforming of existing resources in a more effective and efficient fashion, and aimed at supporting the Valuation Roll function, have been ongoing over the summer. Detailed examination of work practices and processes have been assessed and improvements identified. The roll out of these will begin shortly. Further change will be implemented over the coming months.
- 9.3 Staff testing of updated ICT Network Infrastructure improvements is scheduled to start on the 9th November with an anticipated completion date of 4th December.

10.0 COUNCIL TAX – MAINTENANCE

- 10.1 Over the period 1st April to date 1,882 new houses have been added to the list, this compares to 3,317 for the same period in 2019.

New Housing	Edinburgh	Midlothian	West Lothian	East Lothian	Total
01/04/20 to 27/10/20	1,135	171	305	271	1,882
Sep 20 to Oct 20	554	47	131	107	839
01/04/19 to 27/10/20	1,696	350	669	602	3,317
Sep 19 to Oct 19	335	86	153	159	733

- 10.2 It should be noted that during September and October numbers of new house inserts have increased significantly to 114% of pre-Covid levels in 2019, perhaps indicating that the house sale market is recovering.
- 10.3 There are currently 144 outstanding Council Tax appeals. These are being dealt with subject to the limitations imposed by the pandemic. I have asked the secretary to the VAC if the committee would be amenable to disposing of some of these appeals by way of written submission.

11.0 COVID – UPDATE

- 11.1 Staff continue to follow Government advice and are in the main working from home. I do have a number of staff attending the office daily to deal with the canvass and the upcoming by-election. Social distancing guidelines are being adhered to.
- 11.2 Our Covid Risk Assessment is regularly updated to take account any changes to Scottish Government guidelines. All updates are published on our website.
- 11.3 We continue to review and improve our ability to work effectively and safely from home. This is being achieved by gradually providing staff with corporate laptops and introducing two factor authentication to increase both user and LVJB system network remote access security. We will commence formal home assessments when it is safe to do so.
- 11.4 I am now looking at preparing a plan for the activities we shall be able to undertake depending on which tier of restriction any of the constituent councils are placed in at any given time. For example, external activities will be different in tier 1 as against tier 4. This will allow seamless transition as and when tier restrictions are amended for any given location.

12.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 12.1 The Board is asked to note the content of this report.

Gary Elliott
INTERIM ASSESSOR & ERO