

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

6th September 2021

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. However, since 9th August a limited number of staff have attended the office to carry out their normal duties. Attendance has been on a rota basis to allow all members of staff the opportunity to work from South Gyle should they wish to do so and also take account of ongoing risks in relation to Covid-19.

2.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION – MAINTENANCE

- 2.1 Since the last progress report to the Board in June 2021 all maintenance tasks supporting the registration process have continued.
- 2.2 Key processing volumes reflecting the period April to August inclusive are shown below.

	Edinburgh	Midlothian	West Lothian	East Lothian	Totals
Additions	31,820	3,293	6,185	4,264	45,562
Deletions	19,522	2,154	4,038	2,633	28,347
Amendments	520	74	183	90	867

3.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION – HOUSEHOLD CANVASS 2021

- 3.1 The annual household canvass has begun. Phone canvass started on the 26th August and door to door canvass is due to start on the 13th September. Door to door canvass will adhere to strict procedures to mitigate as far as possible any risk from Covid-19.

- 3.2 The data matching process has already taken place and the statistics are shown below alongside the 2020 figures for comparative purposes.

Property Matching Scores

	<u>2020</u>	<u>2021</u>
National Data Matching	58%	58%
Data Matching Post-Local Data	67%	72%

Elector Matching Scores

Electors Matched	75.50%	75.60%
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Property Matching Routes

Number of properties in Route 1	293,652	319,564
Number of properties in Route 2	129,863	108,923
Number of properties in Route 3	17,787	17,931
Response to E-Comms	40%	36%
Response to CCBs	53%	n/a

4.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION – LEGISLATION

- 4.1 Currently a new Elections Bill is proceeding through parliament at Westminster. It has had its first reading and has moved onto the second. There is a great deal of content within the Bill and should anyone wish to read it a link is shown below.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-02/0138/210138.pdf>

- 4.2 The particular piece of legislation contained within the Bill that I would like to bring to your attention relates to the introduction of voter ID at national elections, in essence a Westminster general election. It does not relate to Scottish Parliamentary or Scottish Local Government elections.
- 4.3 As it currently stands the responsibility for providing Voter ID to anyone who requires it will rest on the local Electoral Registration Officer. Details of how the provision of Voter ID will work in practice are at an extremely early stage and there are many unknowns at the current time. However, there is clearly a risk to the Board regarding additional costs relating to Voter ID and at the current time I have no details regarding any potential additional funding from Westminster to cover these costs.
- 4.4 It is early days in this process but I felt it prudent to make the Board aware of this change to Electoral Registration. I will provide further updates to the Board at subsequent meetings as the process moves forward.

5.0 ELECTORAL LEGISLATION – ELECTIONS

- 5.1 A by-election was held on August 5th for Ward 5 in West Lothian, East Livingston / East Calder. I am pleased to report that there were no issues. I received one emergency proxy application on the day of the election.
- 5.2 There are currently no further by-elections scheduled at the current time.

6.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION ENGAGEMENT

- 6.1 I have continued to engage with unregistered electors in a number of ways. A detailed note of these engagement activities is contained within my report of 14th June 2021.
- 6.2 Traditionally, the reformed annual electoral registration canvass has provided an additional opportunity to engage with electors at every property within the four constituent council areas. The introduction of eCanvass (via email) in 2020, alongside traditional methods of canvass, has presented a supplementary avenue of engagement which we are taking full advantage of.
- 6.3 To ensure service user confidence of the legitimacy of e-communications, prescribed wording is used. This was provided by the Electoral Commission following consumer testing. The LVJB website has been updated to provide information regarding the reformed canvass on the main landing page and 'Electoral' section, as well as the publication of a news item.
- 6.4 There has been further promotion of the annual household canvass through social media, enabling us to work in partnership with the 4 constituent councils communications departments to amplify messaging. This has been focussed on key issue dates and more activity is scheduled throughout the remaining canvass period.

7.0 VALUATION ROLL – MAINTENANCE

- 7.1 For the period 1st April 2021 to 26th August 2021, 1,035 changes have been made to the valuation roll with respect to running roll activities. These changes comprised 234 amendments to existing entries, 314 deletions and 487 inserts with an additional c.1,250 name changes. This compares to 778 changes in the comparative period in 2020 and 1,313 in 2019.

	Edinburgh	Midlothian	W. Lothian	E. Lothian	Total
Inserts	411	23	32	21	487
Deletions	233	28	26	27	314
Amendments	151	22	31	30	234

7.2 This represents about 79% of pre-Covid levels looking at the same period in 2019/20. This figure is a further increase on that reported at the previous three board meetings.

7.3 The internal survey of property has now resumed, though on a limited basis and only if the required information cannot be accessed by other means.

8.0 VALUATION ROLL – APPEALS

8.1 There are currently 396 outstanding 2017 Revaluation appeals, excluding appeals that have been referred to the Lands Tribunal. All of these have been cited for hearing before the end of the calendar year. There are in total 16,500 outstanding running roll appeals of which 9,704 relate directly to Covid. The vast majority of the remainder, though not directly giving Covid as the ground of appeal, will also be Covid related. Further to my verbal update at the last Board meeting the disposal date for these appeals has been pushed back to 31st December 2022. It is also anticipated that the Scottish Government are likely to legislate to remove Covid as a valid ground of appeal. As yet I have no further update on this particular issue.

8.2 The resumption of physical Valuation Appeal Committee hearings is due to begin on the 2nd September which is to be welcomed. Increasing Covid infection rates may change this, though that would ultimately be a decision for the Valuation Appeal Committee. I had a recent on site meeting with the Secretary and Vice-Chairperson of the VAC to ensure that both parties were happy that all appropriate mitigation was in place to allow physical hearings to take place safely.

9.0 COUNCIL TAX – MAINTENANCE

9.1 Over the period 1st April 2020 to 26th August 2021, 3,294 new houses have been added to the list, this compares to 4,898 for the same period in 2019/20.

New Housing	Edinburgh	Midlothian	West Lothian	East Lothian	Total
01/04/21 to 26/08/21	1,095	323	307	458	2,183
01/04/20 to 26/08/20	567	113	169	147	996
01/04/19 to 26/08/19	1,338	263	481	421	2,503

9.2 The figures for 20/21 are running at about 87% of those of 19/20. It's good to see that the new housing volume is nearing pre Covid levels.

9.3 There are currently c.200 outstanding Council Tax appeals. Although, due to statutory disposal dates Revaluation 2017 appeals are taking precedence, I continue to engage with appellants to attempt to resolve their appeals. However, those which require to be heard before the VAC are unlikely to be heard until early 2022.

10.0 COVID – UPDATE

- 10.1 I am ensuring that my staff continue to follow Government advice and are in the main working from home. I have initiated a limited return to the office for staff who wish to do. The attendance is on a very limited basis, at the moment 1 day per week, and a strict rota is in place to ensure any risk of Covid transmission is mitigated as much as possible. Any future reintroduction of restrictions may lead me to having to reconsider this.
- 10.2 Fortunately, we do have a fairly large office and we have amended the layout to mitigate as much as possible issues relating to Covid in anticipation of increased staff attendance. Our Covid Risk Assessment continues to be updated to take account of any changes to Scottish Government guidelines. All updates are published on our website.

11.0 Governance Strategy Group

- 11.1 The most recent meeting of the Governance Strategy Group was held on the 25th August 2021. In attendance were myself, LVJB Head of Governance, Councillors Key, and Russell. Topics discussed were the proposed changes in relation to Voter ID, progress in relation to the St. James Quarter in Edinburgh and an update on limited return to office working.

12.0 Period 4 Financial Statement

- 12.1 I note the content of the Treasurer's Period 4 Financial Statement.

13.0 RECOMMENDATION

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

Gary Elliott
INTERIM ASSESSOR & ERO