

**MINUTE OF THE SCOTTISH
RATEPAYERS' FORUM
HELD IN GLASGOW ON
29TH NOVEMBER 2005**

Present: Garry Clark (Scottish Chambers of Commerce); Alistair Don (SLTA); Ian Duncan (Scottish Executive); Roger Littlewood (Inter bank Forum); Ken McCormack, (James Barr representing CBI/RICS); Tony McRitchie (Montagu Evans representing Forum of Private Business); Allan Traynor (IRRV Scotland, Revenues Forum); Andrew Watson (Federation of Small Businesses); William Sommerville, **Chairman**, (President SAA); Mike Lithgow (Secretary SAA); Jim McEwan (SAA); L Walker (SAA)

Mark Dickson and Gordon Todd (Scottish Water)

1.0 Welcome & Introductions

The Chairman extended a warm welcome to all members. He also welcomed Mark Dickson and Gordon Todd of Scottish Water who had agreed to give a presentation and to Les Walker of the Scottish Assessors' Association who would address the meeting on the subject of the Assessors' Portal. It was agreed that these two items (Agenda items 5 and 6) would be taken first.

(5.0) Scottish Water - Presentation by Mark Dickson and Gordon Todd

Mark Dickson gave a presentation setting out Scottish Water's vision and strategic direction over the next few years. A copy of the presentation will be circulated with these minutes.

During subsequent questions it was explained that Scottish Water would continue to base their billing, for existing properties which had not been physically altered, on March 2000 Rateable Values. Billing, for new properties and for properties which had been altered, would be based on current Rateable Values. A number of members present questioned the inequity which this gave rise to. It was explained it was likely that the move to charging based on metered amounts would happen all at once when the program of meter installation for all non-domestic properties was complete. Against that background the Minister had decided that to move to billing on current values now and then to introduce further billing changes over the next few years when all non-domestic properties had had meters installed, would cause greater turbulence and uncertainty than continuing to bill most customers using March 2000 Rateable Values.

(6.0) SAA Portal – General Update by Les Walker.

Les Walker explained that his purpose in attending the meeting was to consult on the issue of valuation roll histories which had been raised at the previous meeting

of the Ratepayers' Forum. This would form part of a wider consultation involving users of the Portal and would be central to the formation of the business case.

Members confirmed that the development of valuation roll histories would be very useful. In terms of how far back histories should extend there was general agreement that for transitional relief purposes the position at 31st March 2005, incorporating any appeal adjustments, would suffice. One member voiced a preference for histories going back to the 1980s. This was not generally felt by members present to be required.

It was agreed that the essential functional requirement was for value histories to be displayed. Changes to proprietor, tenant and occupier information although desirable was felt by members present to be less important.

2.0 Apologies

- 2.1 Sandy McConochie (Past-President SAA); Douglas J Gillespie (Vice-President SAA); Fiona Moriarty (British Retail Consortium)

3.0 Minutes of the Meeting of 9th August 2005

- 3.1 This minute was approved without amendment.

4.0 Matters arising from the Minute of the Meeting of 9th August 2005

- 4.1 *(4.4 Billing Issues)*
Announcement on rate poundage.

Allan Traynor raised the issue of the impact the announcement on rate poundage on 2006/2007 would have on transitional relief calculations. He advised that because transitional relief was calculated based on the liability at 31st March 2005 and 1st April 2006 it was not clear how the reductions in the rate poundage would be taken account of. Billing software would have to be changed and tested and unless Regulations were put in place as a matter of urgency it was likely that for those properties affected (potentially about 30% of all non-domestic properties) inaccurate bills would have to be issued at 1st April 2006. Ian Duncan gave assurances that the issue of Regulations was actively being addressed by the Scottish Executive and that guidance would be issued in the near future.

Allan Traynor agreed to raise with the IRRV the matter of the report referred to by Roger Littlewood in the previous minute with a view to obtaining a copy. He disputed that 80% of bills issued in Scotland contained technical errors. He advised that there were only 4 or 5 software companies supplying billing software to Scottish Local Authorities and that the software supplier used by his own council also supplied about 9 other Scottish Local Authorities. Apart from differences in logos and layouts the information contained in the bills was identical. Transitional relief calculations and

interest on overpaid rates are shown separately and not on Scottish rates bills. Backdated bills were not issued in Scotland.

Allan Traynor advised that a Scottish benchmarking group had been set up which was looking at statistics and processes. The group would be carrying out consultation exercises with interested parties and meantime he would welcome any feed back where differences in procedures are identified.

Ken McCormack suggested that he had experienced issues with some Councils on the payment of interest on overpaid rates. Allan Traynor agreed to raise this with the benchmarking group.

Agenda items 7, 8 and 9 were taken together

William Sommerville advised that the levels of appeals in relation to the 2005 Revaluation across Scotland as a whole were about 67% of the level at the 2000 Revaluation. Much of the variation in levels between individual Assessors offices was conditioned by whether the constituent Local Authorities had lodged appeals.

Some limited progress in appeal discussions with agents had been made with certain categories. It was recognised that there had been a variety of reasons for the limited progress which included in the first place, agents securing clients instructions.

Discussions had taken place on a practical way forward for the disposal of the bulk categories of appeal subjects during the first half of 2006. Assessors had taken on board the concerns expressed by agents at previous revaluations. Consultations amongst Assessors had taken place and there was agreement in principle that the citing for hearing of shops, offices and industrial subject would be staggered so that not all Assessors were citing these subjects on the same date. Some Assessors would start with shops, some with offices and others with industrials. The Assessor for Glasgow would start with licensed premises.

Mike Lithgow advised that the Lanarkshire Appeal Panel website was now live. The subjects that were cited for particular hearing dates would be listed together with the e-mail address of the Assessors' contact. Subjects cited and Assessors' contact details would also be available on the Glasgow Assessors' website.

10.0 Freedom of Information

- 10.1 The Scottish Assessors' Association had received the opinion of Senior Counsel on the extent to which Assessors should be responding to requests for information under FOI and other issues. Although Assessors recognized and had embraced the new culture of openness and transparency, they would continue to adopt a cautious approach in responding to FOI requests for information where issues of confidentiality presented. Requests, for example for the turnover relating to public houses, would be refused on the basis that they are given in confidence.

11.0 AOCB

11.1 There was none.

12.0 Date of Next Meetings

12.1 The next meeting is scheduled for 7th March 2006. It was agreed that the secretary would circulate a list of dates for approval for the following four meetings.