From the Minister of Finance

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Dear William

INQUIRY INTO BROADBAND INVESTMENT IN NI AND LPS DATABASE

Thank you for your letter of 26th January about the LPS Address Database.

The Committee may find some background information on the address database helpful in its consideration of the matters raised at the recent hearing on broadband investment.

Pointer® is the name given to the authoritative address database for Northern Ireland. It is maintained by Land & Property Services (LPS), with input from district councils and the Royal Mail. It was created in 2002 to address the lack of a recognised common standard for collecting and maintaining addresses within NICS Departments, which meant that Departments were using inaccurate, incomplete and out of date addressing. Pointer® is the common standard address dataset for every property (addressable building) in Northern Ireland. There are currently 1,004,315 records within the Pointer product as January 2021, although this number regularly changes as the dataset is updated daily.

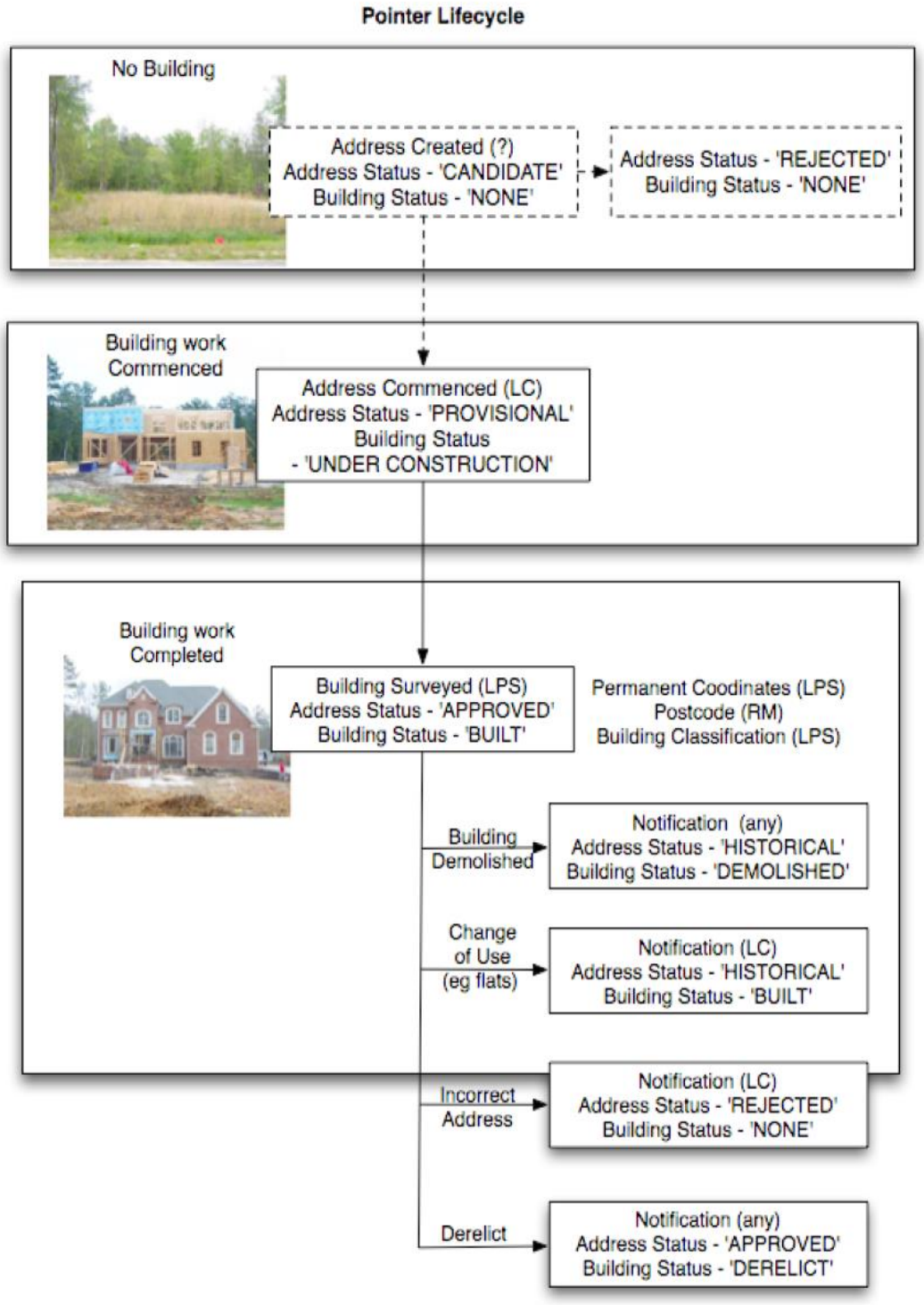
The address creation lifecycle

A number of the questions raised at the Committee's hearing hinge on how a properties' address gets added to the Pointer product. Therefore, I think some background information on the address creation lifecycle will be helpful.

The address creation cycle of Pointer begins with district councils who, under the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, are empowered to name streets and number buildings. LPS add the spatial elements of the address including the classification, and Royal Mail add postcode and postal town to enable their delivery service.

The process for initiating an address creation begins with local Councils building control who give the building number, road and approximate coordinates. Other fields of data are then added to the dataset.

The diagram below illustrates the lifecycle.



The Committee will note that throughout the lifecycle, the 'Building Status' and 'Address Status' change at each stage. These are the two main fields that determine where an address is in the lifecycle.

'Building Status' gives the current physical state of the building. This can be 'none', 'under construction', 'built', 'derelict' or 'demolished'.

'Address Status' gives the current state of the address, which can be:

- Candidate – planning permission has been granted but building has not commenced.
- Provisional – the building is under construction.
- Approved – LPS add permanent co-ordinates and/or a building classification. A Postcode may also be added, although this does not affect the Address Status.
- Historical – Addresses that are no longer in use due to dereliction, demolition etc.
- Rejected – Indicates the deletion of an incorrect address.

The Pointer database records all addresses at all stages of the address creation lifecycle. However, most users of the Pointer product tend to only focus on addresses with a building status of 'Built' and an address status of 'Approved'.

Depending on the use that they plan for the data, Pointer users can filter the product to select different categories of the building and address status. For example, for the recent Census, NISRA included the provisional address status in the expectation that a house would be completed and occupied on Census day.

Why approximately 6,000 premises are not on the LPS database

To understand what has happened with these 6,000 addresses, it is important to be clear on the distinction between the Pointer database and the Pointer product that most users access. This difference means that it is possible for a property to be known to LPS and for rates to be collected from it but not to appear in the main Pointer Product.

A property can only be valued for rates if it is in the Pointer database. There are anomalies when an address identified by LPS Valuation Directorate does not exist in the database because it has not followed the normal lifecycle process as noted above. This can be due to the normal building control processes not being followed and the Council unware of the property, when this happens, the Pointer team will create it in the database using information supplied by the LPS Valuation Directorate with a flag of 'unverified'. The address will then be passed to the relevant district council to verify. Pending the verification of the address by the Council, it can be

used by LPS for the purposes of rates billing and collection. During this time, the address is in the Pointer database, but will not appear in the Pointer product accessed by most users.

Councils may refuse to validate an address if building control policies have not been followed correctly or if they do not have the available resource to undertake the work. That address therefore cannot appear in the main Pointer product (although it is in the database) as only Councils via the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 are empowered to name streets and number buildings. This is where there is a divergence occurs between the addresses in the rates database and those in the Pointer product.

The 6,000 addresses that were mentioned during the Committee hearing are addresses that have not been verified by the relevant district Council. The majority of these addresses are legacy issues that Councils are now having difficulty clearing – these have been highlighted as part of the data cleansing process which is happening due to the procurement of a new address management system.

What can be done going forward to improve accuracy of data held by LPS

LPS is in the process of refreshing its technology and creating a new Address Management System. They have been (and still are) working very closely with all district councils and their current technical provider to create a new system that the Councils will also use. An Addressing Sub-Committee involving representatives from the councils and LPS has been set up with the following objectives:

- Review the current processes for handling unverified addresses and address cleansing
- Investigate, scope and provide options on how to fix the unverified addresses not currently in the Pointer product
- Identify, scope and provide options to deal with as yet unidentified unverified addresses
- Examine new workflows to eliminate the creation of unverified addresses through more timely and improved intelligence
- Propose options to deal with address cleansing

LPS aim to work with Councils to create new workflows that will satisfy building control processes while permitting the address to go into the main Pointer product. The new system will also create clear visuals of where an address is in the lifecycle process. The new system will also have an improved address reporting facility for users to feed back issues or intelligence about addresses.

The more Departments that use Pointer and feedback intelligence on the status of addresses, the more accurate the database will be. For example, LPS worked

closely with NISRA colleagues to improve data quality before the census. Regrettably, all of the ground truthing of addresses by census staff was not able to be shared back with LPS since this is not permitted under the provisions of the Census Act. Fibrus are now feeding back information on derelict addresses to the Department for the Economy which could be used to update Pointer.

Finally, I would note that the eligibility for broadband access through Project Stratum was based on an address being in the Pointer product on a particular day that the analysis for the scheme was completed. I stated at the beginning of this letter that Pointer is updated every day. This is necessary there is constant change as properties are built, demolished, split or merged. The continual updating means that any address may be in any part of the address lifecycle process at any point in time. LPS met with officials from the Department for the Economy in 2020 and clarified this position, but I am not aware of any process being put in place to deal with the kind of exceptions that have occurred in practice.

The main Pointer product was only one of a number of datasets that the Department for the Economy could have selected to determine eligibility for Project Stratum. While it is the authoritative address dataset, as I have noted, users can be provided with alternative products that better reflect the purpose for which they require the data. If requested, LPS would have been willing to provide data from the domestic valuation list or the rating system which may have given a better indication of the current occupation status of the address the unverified addresses issue would not have arisen.

I hope this information is useful to the Committee.

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