

## Assessor's Report

2007/8 saw all three of our functions receive particular attention.

In May 2007 electors went to the polls to cast their votes in the Scottish Parliamentary and Local Government elections. Obviously the outcome of these is now concluded, however the well-publicised problems associated with various counts around the country gave rise to various enquiries and consultations.

In my capacity as Electoral Registration Officer for the Lothians, I am pleased to be able to indicate that the work undertaken by the Joint Board in the run up and during the elections received no adverse comment and my staff provided a highly efficient and effective service during this period.

It is too easy to be complacent however, and it must be acknowledged that no matter how small a part played or how well a job was done the democratic process has been severely tested. For this reason I have either directly or through the Electoral Registration Committee of the Scottish Assessor's Association participated in many consultations and commented on numerous proposals as appropriate with the sole intention of assisting the process of improvement.

Also, this year has, as part of a government defined fraud prevention initiative, seen us start the process of collecting personal identifying information from electors who have chosen to vote by post. This was completed in a number of months and

involved new forms being designed and issued and new processes and software deployed within our applications.

Council Tax has not only come under the spot light through proposals for reform but also due to widely publicised national media attention advising the public to check their Council Tax banding. This led us to divert staff resources to deal with thousands of enquiries. I am delighted to say that notwithstanding this extra workload we were able to improve our Council Tax performance as the figures detailed in this report indicate.

The installation of Edinburgh tramways is underway and ratepayers with commercial properties that abound the proposed tram routes have either directly, through the media

or through business organisations, sought to achieve reductions in their rate liabilities. Again considerable resource was diverted and continues to be diverted to deal with these enquiries and appeals.

The key performance indicators for the Valuation Roll show that despite this additional work we have achieved considerable improvement in this area.

It has been a challenging year for the Board, a lot of hard work has been involved but I feel the staff can be justly proud of their efforts and the emerging picture of delivering continuing improvements in performance and quality of service.

## Electoral Registration

The year started with preparation for the Scottish Parliamentary and Local Authority elections.

While the majority of work at this time relates to the Returning Officer function, we are responsible for the processing of absent vote applications and the provision of this information on time to the Returning Officers. We also update and provide copies of relevant parts of the Electoral Register for use at polling stations and undertake a number of other tasks, such as the issue of poll cards, on the behalf of the Returning Officers.

During an election the Electoral Register is subject to its greatest scrutiny as regards completeness and accuracy, and while many enquiries were received at this time none gave rise to an acknowledgement of omission on the Board's part.

Other issues arose during the elections in May following from which a number of enquiries, consultations and reports have arisen. Where appropriate Electoral Registration Officers throughout Scotland have taken part in these offering information and advice where possible. This is an ongoing process and it remains to be seen what the outcome shall be and what changes to the Electoral Registration and Election process shall be recommended.

During 2007 we increased our efforts to promote the registration process. This included advertising on local buses and local ethnic radio, attending service elector open days at Army barracks, joint activity with the Electoral Commission during students week, and deploying our own information stand at various high profile locations within the region.

The single biggest activity for Electoral Registration Officers during any year is the annual canvass.

This starts towards the end of August and is completed by the end of November with the new Electoral Register being published on 1<sup>st</sup> December.

Some 375,000 household canvass forms were posted initially

and were followed by up to two reminders as necessary. By the end of the canvass nearly 600,000 had been issued.

The final return rate for canvass forms for 2007/8 was 78.9%. This was down slightly from 2006/7, which saw a return rate of 80.4%. Notwithstanding our increased publicity during the canvass, the return rate was affected by a Royal Mail postal strike that caused disruption to mail deliveries during this period.

The table below indicates the return rates and elector numbers for each of the Council authorities of the Board.

Activity	Canvass forms returned	No of Electors as at 1/12/07	No of Electors as at 1/12/06
Edinburgh	76.57%	332,950	334,826
East Lothian	85.57%	74,120	72,778
West Lothian	79.53%	123,118	122,325
Midlothian	84.29%	62,125	61,818

Increased efforts with publicity and an extensive door to door canvass planned for 2008/9 shall hopefully see the return rate improve.

Another new and major electoral task during 2007/8 was the collection of Personal Identifiers from those electors who prefer to vote by post.

The collection of a signature and date of birth is now required by law and is aimed at reducing the risk of fraud during elections.

From a standing list of nearly 80,000 postal voters, a total of 67,500 forms were returned and duly processed. As this was a new requirement considerable work was required to deal with form design and the creation of new processes and procedures within the organisation. A spin off from this task was dealing

with considerable numbers of phone calls received from the public and in some instances staff visited electors to provide assistance.

Electoral Registration is an exciting area of our work, with hardly a year passing which does not involve a change to legislation leading to new challenges for staff. We always aim to provide a high quality service and are constantly reviewing our practices to seek areas where further improvement can be made.

Register to vote...



...make a difference!



### CONTACT INFORMATION

## Valuation Roll and Council Tax

Both the Valuation Roll and Council Tax List form the mainstay in our current local taxation system. As both of these functions relate to property, levels of activity and influences within the national and local property sector are reflected in our workload.

Throughout the year staff are constantly monitoring the progress of lodged building warrants so that insertions, deletions and amendments can be made.

The tables below provide general information on the Valuation Roll and Council Tax List.

**Valuation Roll (as at 31 March 2008)**

Authority	Number of Properties	Total Rateable Value
City of Edinburgh	18,380	£784.9 million
Midlothian	2,688	£57.5 million
West Lothian	5,065	£166.2 million
East Lothian	3,178	£49.9 million
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>29,311</b>	<b>£1,058.5 million</b>

**Council Tax (as at 31 March 2008)**

Authority	No of Dwellings
City of Edinburgh	229,418
Midlothian	34,656
West Lothian	73,685
East Lothian	43,554
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>381,313</b>

The monitoring and assessment of performance is vitally important as this provides the public with an indication of the level of service being provided.

Activity associated with both the Valuation Roll and Council Tax List is subject to national Key Performance Indicators. As can be seen from the tables below the criteria used is the time it takes from the date building works were completed or property occupied, to make the necessary amendments reflecting these changes in the Valuation Roll and Council Tax List.

**Valuation Roll Performance (as at 31 March 2008)**

Year	Total number of entries	Total Rateable Value	Number of Amendments	Percentage of amendments within 3 months	Percentage of amendments within 3-6 months	Percentage of amendments more than 6 months
2005/06	28,753	£1,042.4 m	3,628	64	19.4	16.6
2006/07	28,920	£1,050.2m	3,314	74.9	13.9	11.2
2007/08	29,311	£1,058.5m	4,206	83.26	11.63	5.11

**Council Tax - Performance (as at 31 March 2008)**

Year	Numbers of Inserts to Council Tax List	Percentage of Inserts Within 3 Months	Percentage of Inserts Within 3-6 months	Percentage of Inserts More than 6 months
2005/06	4,288	81.2	12.4	6.4
2006/07	5,515	84.8	11.3	3.9
2007/08	5,323	93.2	5.2	1.6

As can be seen considerable improvement has been achieved during 2007/8 for Valuation Roll and Council Tax activities. This improving level of service to our customers is to be applauded and we shall, by review and innovation, continue to strive for greater efficiencies and improved performance in the years ahead.

Another major activity within the year has been the disposal of appeals arising from the 2005 Revaluation.

Every five years all commercial and non-domestic property in the Lothian's area is re-valued. The rateable value is the Assessors estimate of the likely annual rental value as defined by legislation which the property may attract as at the date of Revaluation. To achieve this, work commences years in advance of the revaluation date by way of collecting and analysing rental evidence and compiling schemes of valuation for application to the many different property types. The last revaluation was effective from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005 and the next is scheduled for 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010.

Ratepayers are entitled to appeal against the rateable value placed on their property and the table below gives detail of this.

**2005 Revaluation - Appeals**

Appeals lodged following 2005 Revaluation	8,578
Original Rateable Value of all appeals disposed of by 31/3/08	£571.87 million
Revised Rateable Value of appeals disposed of by 31/3/08	£556.51 million
Average percentage reduction in Rateable Value per appealed subject	2.69%
Number of appeals outstanding as at 31/3/08	558

## Customer Support

In this modern age it is not just performance statistics that are critical, the wider aspects of customer care and support are now of equal importance. How customers access our services, how we interact with the community, how we deal with enquiries and complaints are just some of the wider aspects of our service delivery that require to be dealt with.

Our customer base is wide and varied and throughout 2007/8 we have been reviewing the ways in which we present our service. Information is provided on our website and is also available through the Scottish Assessor's Association web portal that is proving hugely successful. As an organisation we issue many thousands of forms throughout the year requesting information. These are reviewed regularly to ensure simplicity and ease of completeness, and information in a number of different languages is also included. We appreciate that more direct contact is often a better approach and we achieve that by locating our information stand at various venues and events throughout Lothian.

In addition to the above, within the office, we operate a Support Section which provides an immediate telephone and public reception answering service. We aim to answer all such enquiries at the point of receipt and our Support staff are trained to deal with all but the most technical of questions. At peak times this section can be answering between 500 and 600 telephone calls a day. Customer Support is a developing area of service delivery and throughout 2008/9 we shall continue to expand and improve the ways in which we provide access and information on our services.