

Assessor's Report

2008-2009 has highlighted a number of emerging aspects in relation to effective service delivery. One of these is partnership working. By drawing on each other's knowledge and strengths a more complete service can be delivered to the community. During 2008-2009 the Board was closely involved with West Lothian Council, working together with their Democracy Challenge initiative. This was a hugely successful exercise aimed at promoting the electoral registration and voting process with 16 and 17 year olds. Indeed such was the success that the initiative was short-listed for a Cosla award in the category Community Planning and Local Democracy.

Another good example of partnership working relates to the collection of personal identifier information for the purposes of postal voting. While we have had close links with each of the Returning Officers for our constituent councils for many years, the

requirement to collect personal identifier data and provide this at times of elections to the Returning Officer has forged closer working relations. The sharing of technical details and establishing new joint processes is aimed at providing the elector with an efficient joined up service where the needs of the voter come first.

I have throughout the year attended meetings of the Interim Elections Management Board. This group, previously known as the Elections Strategy Group, was formed in answer to the numerous consultations carried out after the Scottish Parliamentary and Local Government elections in 2007. It comprises membership from throughout Scotland of Chief Executive/ Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers, and representatives from the Electoral Commission, Scotland Office and Cosla. Its aim is to ensure accurate electoral registers and the provision of well-run elections throughout Scotland.

Another important element in service delivery is in relation to how best to promote and inform the public, our stakeholders, about aspects of our service. During the year the Board approved a Customer Care Policy in which targets are laid out not just in terms of statistical performance, but also in respect of the way and manner in which we communicate with our stakeholders whether that be directly, in writing, by e-mail, or by phone. We aim to always provide an effective, prompt, professional and friendly service.

It is vitally important that where and when we can, direct contact to promote our service to our stakeholders is made. This contact is aimed at providing information and access to certain services in an easy and informative fashion at venues and gatherings where there is a greater opportunity of effective inter-action with all sectors of the community. More detail on this activity during 2008-2009 is provided in following sections of this report.

Once a level of service delivery is established action needs to be taken to ensure that this level can be maintained in the face of a disaster or serious complication within our key applications. During 2008-2009 senior staff have spent some time creating a strategy that would deal with such an eventuality. Emergencies are identified on our strategic and organisational risk registers along with mitigation action where possible. A Business Continuity Plan is in place and in the event of a disaster we now have established procedures that would see a return to service delivery sufficient to comply with our essential services requirements within 24 hours, and a return to normal delivery shortly thereafter.

Finally as can be seen in this report performance remains at a high level and I am pleased that staff are able to acknowledge and participate in the changing needs and expectations of our stakeholders.

Electoral Registration

Of all the Boards functions, Electoral Registration continues to be the highest profile activity. During 2008-2009 a number of interesting developments have taken place.

We undertook the submission of information to The Electoral Commission with regard to Performance Standards. The Commission laid out 10 standards, covering such aspects as completeness, maintenance, integrity, public awareness and participation, and training. Against these, on a self-assessment basis and using supporting evidence, we established that we either met or exceeded all the required standards.

Following submission the Board was selected to undergo a verification process conducted by the Commission and we have been recently informed that our self assessment and supporting evidential documentation has been approved without alteration.

Increasing public awareness of the electoral registration process is now an activity in its own right, to be considered and undertaken throughout the year.



During 2008-2009 we were involved in a range of direct contact activities such as attending Neighbourhood Community meetings, participating in the Democracy Challenge initiative with West Lothian Council aimed at school students aged 16 and 17, attending the Edinburgh Mela, a multi-cultural gathering, and appearing at student registration days and open days at army barracks. We have purchased new lightweight information display stands that have been used at the venues mentioned and taken by staff to locations such as supermarkets and shopping centres. While we find the direct contact approach the most fruitful and encouraging, we also promoted registration through newspaper, radio, web site, and local transport advertising.

When out on promotional activities our staff are now provided with jackets and shirts displaying a corporate Electoral Registration logo. This increases their profile and presents a professional image.

For many years the annual electoral canvass has been an all postal process. As part of the move to improve registration levels a return to the door to door approach on a limited basis was undertaken during the year.

While in previous years we have found it difficult to recruit canvassers, following a direct approach to staff in each of our constituent Councils, 66 temporary canvassers were employed to undertake a door to door canvass of some 33,000 households within Lothian.

Door to door canvass is in itself a more resource hungry activity. Careful training, management and monitoring is required, along with extra expenditure on clothing, baggage and personal security items.

Notwithstanding this, out of the 33,121 households canvassed, 21,143 forms were completed on the doorstep and in every area that was canvassed in this manner an increase in the overall return rate was achieved with the average increase being 8%.

This is very encouraging and further door to door activities are planned for the 2009 canvass.

Overall the canvass for 2008 produced similar results to the previous year and the relevant figures are noted below.

Authority	Canvass forms returned 2008	No of Electors as at 1/12/08	Canvass forms returned 2007	No of Electors as at 1/12/07
Edinburgh	76.62%	332,950	76.57%	334,826
East Lothian	84.55%	74,120	85.57%	72,778
West Lothian	80.57%	123,118	79.53%	122,325
Midlothian	86.38%	62,125	84.29%	61,818

Other activities during the year involved providing electoral information and assistance to the Returning Officer for a by-election in the Forth ward, and considerable work has continued with the preparation and production of absent vote personal identifier information. We also commenced the process of upgrading our current electoral registration application that is used by staff and aim to have the new version in place by the summer of 2009.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Valuation Roll and Council Tax

This has been a particularly busy period for staff involved with Valuation Roll activities. Firstly the last of the appeals that were lodged following the 2005 Revaluation required to be dealt with. All 558 appeals reported as outstanding as at the 31 March 2008 were cleared by the statutory deadline of 31 December 2008. While every attempt is made to avoid the situation, the last appeals of every Revaluation are invariably some of the more complex and contentious. Considerable time and effort is required to deal with these and many meetings take place with ratepayers agents in order to seek resolution. In some cases this is not possible and recourse to the Valuation Appeal Committee is necessary. When this happens time has to be spent on preparing evidential material and, if it is thought necessary, briefing legal counsel. Resulting from the 2005 Revaluation the Board appeared before the Valuation Appeal Committee on 33 occasions and was successful on 23 of these appearances. The table below provides information on the impact appeals had on total rateable value.

Appeals lodged following 2005 Revaluation	8,578
Original Rateable Value of all appeals	£747.86 million
Revised Rateable Value of appeals	£725.80 million
Average percentage reduction in Rateable Value per appealed subject	2.12%

2010 is the next year of Revaluation when all commercial, or non-domestic, property in Lothian requires to be revalued in order to reflect changes and trends in the rental market over the last five years. Work for this commenced in mid to late 2008. First was with the issue of thousands of Rent Return questionnaires. On return these require initial processing and following that rental analysis commences that shall eventually lead to levels of value being established that can be applied to individual properties. We issued these forms in June/July of 2008 and by Christmas the first individual values were being derived. This process has continued during the first quarter of 2009 and we are now well on our way to completing the 2010 Revaluation by the required time in September 2009.

During this period the Scottish Assessors' Association plays a key role in providing valuation advice on the many different property categories that make up a Valuation Roll and Lothian Valuation Joint Board plays a significant part in the many committees and working groups that are active at this time. In addition key senior staff from Lothian represent the Association at cross border harmonisation meetings with their counterparts south of the border in the Valuation Office Agency. The aim is to secure a level of valuation consistency and parity with more high profile property categories.

In conjunction with these tasks staff undertook the necessary activities surrounding the annual maintenance of the Roll and the figures below provide information on this and its associated performance. It can be seen that performance fell below that of the previous year. The cause of this has been identified as the large number, nearly 150, Valuation Roll changes that were made to properties affected by the Edinburgh Tramways project. The agreed approach taken to these affected the key performance indicator and the measure used. Stripping these out, the actual 3 month performance would have been 83.59%. This matches the previous year.

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
2008/09	29,659	£1,056.8m	4,258	80.77	11.53	7.7

Authority	Number of Properties	Non Domestic Total Rateable Value
City of Edinburgh	18,489	£775.5 million
Midlothian	2,727	£58.6 million
West Lothian	5,230	£172.6 million
East Lothian	3,204	£50.1 million
TOTAL (as at 31/3/09)	29,659	£1,056.8 million

Activity surrounding Council Tax has continued throughout the year and the table below provides information on this and the related performance. It can be seen that we have improved upon or performance since last year however as was to be expected given the current economic climate, the number of new houses entered onto the Council Tax List has reduced. There continues to be a high level of enquiry by council taxpayers regarding council tax bands and we strive to deal with these in as quick and efficient manner as possible. To support this the Boards new policy on Customer Care provides guidance and targets for staff in respect of response times to phone calls, e-mails and letters.

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
2008/09	4,345	94.13	4.53	1.33

Authority	Number of Dwellings
City of Edinburgh	231,319
Midlothian	35,281
West Lothian	74,247
East Lothian	43,957
TOTAL (as at 31/3/09)	384,804

Business Continuity

It is vitally important that we take steps to ensure wherever possible that we can continue service delivery even in the face of a major disaster or critical system failure. This is particularly true when we are involved in critical activity for example at times of canvass, elections and revaluation.

To prepare ourselves as best we can two risk registers are maintained within the organisation. One identifies risk at the strategic level while the other deals with organisational matters. In both cases risks are matched to risk owners and mitigation action that is taken to reduce the risk is recorded. In addition any action that should be considered to reduce the risk further is noted. Both registers are reviewed and amended regularly.

Mitigation of a risk can only be taken so far and is unlikely to completely remove the possibility of the risk occurring.

Given this position, during 2008-2009 we have produced a Business Continuity Plan. This provides detailed information on how we would respond in the event of a major disaster or critical failure occurring.

It highlights critical work periods and the timescale for essential return to service delivery during these times. The senior staff are allocated key roles and their responsibilities are clearly defined. Key activities in respect of accommodation, communication, ICT, staff, etc are also identified.

Recently the senior staff have worked through a mock disaster and as a result elements of the BCP have been reviewed and updated.

While it is hoped that such events never take place it is important that our stakeholders are aware that action has been taken to prepare the Board and bring the its functions and services back on line as quickly and efficiently as possible.