



Valuebill could be the key that unlocks the door to a host of revenue services improvements, says **Ian Sims**

JOIN THE E-DATA REVOLUTION

As published in Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV) LTR Magazine (Jan/Feb 2005)

Reproduced for Valuebill National Project

www.newham.gov.uk/valuebill

Valuebill Hotline: 020 8297 0008

Not another e-government project to fit in with the day job! That was my first thought when Huntingdonshire was invited to be a pilot for Valuebill. We were already committed to a number of service improvement/efficiency projects, so we needed to be persuaded the benefits really would outweigh the costs.

Many of the electronic initiatives to emerge have had merit, but many are discrete packages in specialist areas, with limited possibilities for wider use. But as I started to examine the aims of Valuebill, one of the local e-government projects funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), I could see benefits for primarily property based council services. It fitted in with Huntingdonshire's Customer First initiative – a programme for improving access to the council's services. Through Customer First, we are committed to providing a joined up service (for example to implement a change of address) whether that is through our proposed call centre, customer reception centres or back office processes.

Valuebill was not only the foundation stone on which our property database should be built, it could also be used as a key enabler for the transformation of services that rely on property data – and the vast majority do.

It will seem ridiculous to the younger generation of revenue officers that the disparate software systems of yesteryear meant we had separately maintained property databases for each of the forerunners of council tax, national non-domestic rating (NNDR) and benefits. As we purchased integrated packages in the 1990s, we gained one integrated property database for revenues. But there is, apparently, intelligent life outside revenues and those other services can have scores of different databases, particularly in the larger unitary authorities.

Local government departments tend to be protective of their own knowledge and property databases. But if we are to wipe out senseless duplication and inefficient maintenance, then we have to take some tough decisions. We need to decide where sole responsibility lies for being the property custodian, the 'hub' to which all other 'satellite' systems can link.

This is still a dream for most, so we must

first concentrate on the synchronisation of Valuebill stakeholders. But, from that, the clear decision was made that the local land and property gazetteer (LLPG) has to be the property custodian, based on the unique property reference number (UPRN), which is the key for harmonisation. Databases do not have to be identical (some may, or may not, be BS7666 compliant) provided they are reconciled and linked by the UPRN to ensure integrity, completeness, and guarantee the robustness of the Valuebill Cycle.

Valuebill fits in perfectly with all the e-government drivers and the target of electronically enabling all services by 2005. (I could say much more, but you will find lots of supporting detail in the information packs and the recent publication *The Benefits of Valuebill* available online at <http://www.localgovnp.org.uk/webfiles/Benefits/VALUEBILL%20DOCUMENT.pdf>. If you've not seen all the publicity material already, where have you been hiding?).

“ Valuebill is a key enabler for the transformation of services that rely on property data – and most do ”

This important fact, together with the efficiency savings of linking to one property database, will enable the use of customer relationship management (CRM) systems and enhance the advantages of partnership working between central and local government. It makes a compelling case for every billing authority to take the Valuebill route.

But what investment must we put in? And what extra revenues can we expect? These factors depend very much on your authority's circumstances. How advanced is your LLPG development? How good are your existing property inspection business processes? How well do you work with your local VOA? How much internal data cleansing will your authority need to do before you can attempt to match with the VOA?

Huntingdonshire did not discover a pot of gold in the shape of large numbers of hitherto unbilled properties. We did find a handful of domestic properties though. After all, errors can still be made, even with the

most robust procedures. The project has also had many other merits.

Ongoing benefits include the categorical match between the entry in the valuation list and the billable unit, through the use of the UPRN. This will be particularly beneficial during the 2005 non-domestic revaluation process, as well as the 2007 council tax revaluation. Another obvious benefit is the elimination of paper transactions and manual input, and the consequent reduction in the scope for human error.

My team has always maintained excellent working relations with our local VOA – the Cambridge and Peterborough offices of the St Albans Group – who continue to provide us with a first class service.

Electronic reporting inevitably speeds up the process, but this alone will not help you if you continually give the VOA little or no information to work with. GIGO (to go retro with 1970s computer speak, Garbage In means Garbage Out). On the simple, new-

build estates there's little to worry about, but with individually built dwellings situated in the middle of nowhere, VOA staff need all the help they can get. It's worth it as ultimately they will help you too.

The same is true for splits and mergers, where we have a winning formula. Not only do we include all possible intelligence in the report (contact details, map co-ordinates, digital imagery if appropriate, UPRN, planning application number) we also provide online, 24/7 access to all plans through the council's planning portal.

So my advice to other revenues officers looking at Valuebill is: why not embrace the benefits of the high quality data you will gain? It will improve your revenue collection processes, and may even help transform your whole service delivery. ■

Ian Sims is Local Taxation Manager at Huntingdonshire District Council. Email him at ian.sims@huntsdc.gov.uk