Reviewer’s report

Title: Council tax valuation bands, socio-economic status and population health: a cross-sectional analysis from the Caerphilly Health and Social Needs Study

Version: 1 Date: 27 March 2006

Reviewer: Norman Beale

Reviewer’s report:

General

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

‘22236’ & subsequent numbers quoted on pp. 6 & 7 are really ‘Results’.

Standard Occupational Classification 1991 is now replaced by SOC 2000 (http://www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/soc2000.asp) - the authors need to discuss & defend why they have not used the latest available classification.

The response to survey (p. 8) was 62.7% but analyses were based, in fact, on a final sample which was smaller than this. 1233 of responders could not be linked to a CTVB which brings final sample down to 10859 (only 54.9% of all ‘possibles’) and, on p.14 there is a strong hint that another (perhaps partly overlapping) 9.5% of responders failed to provide social class data, bringing the final sample down, perhaps, as low as 9827 (only 49.7% of all ‘possibles’). These issues need clarification; there is a heightened possibility of sampling biases.

CTVB assessment (p. 12) is based on objective criteria of any property even if these are made externally (during a ‘walk-past’) – reference to the Valuation Office Website (paper reference 2.) lists these e.g. size, layout and locality.

Table 1 quotes property antecedent date values (1991) for Wales only. Figures for England are higher (and should, perhaps be quoted?). Scottish CTVB assessment is different again (£27,000 to £212,000, again at 1991 prices).

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

I wonder whether the title phrase ‘population health’ is inappropriate – Council Tax gives insights at household (individual even) level. Should be pondered.

As expressed, the study ‘aim’ is slightly prolix.

The abbreviation CTVB (throughout) is sensible (citing ‘tax bands’ always causes confusion with income and other taxes that are graduated) but adding an ‘s’ where ‘bands’ in the plural are implied overcomes an irritating grammatical glitch in reading the text.

Reference 2 – really a website of the Valuation Office Authority and run by them. It might be worth
pointing out that access to the Scottish ‘Council Tax’ website is to be found on the homepage.

p.3: ‘... The further attraction ...’ CTVB is also immune to poor participation.

p.3. The phrase ‘...associated with higher GP clinical workload ...’ is nonsensical – perhaps ‘CTVBs are inversely associated with GP workload, the lower the band, the higher the clinical burden’ or something similar.

The technical phrase ‘finite population correction factor’ needs explanation for a general readership.

p. 4. There is published evidence of an association between CTVB and life-style factors – British Journal of General Practice 2005, 55, 512, 233/4 (letter) & in the recent paper (= authors reference 5): both papers cite smoking rates.

p. 12 - students are equally impossible to classify by other socio-economic measures. As far as the elderly living alone are concerned it should be stated that they qualify for a 25% rebate on their Council Tax (effectively lowering their CTVB by one letter). This subtle influence remains totally unexplored to my knowledge.

p.15 ‘... the socio-economic characteristics of the borough ...’ is an assertive statement with no support.

p. 16 Conclusions: first sentence is overstated – the strong association cited is in this study.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

It might be worth recording that this study is the first one to appear from other than the research team in Calne and therefore serves an important corroborative function for the eight (soon) CTVB papers already published. In fact there are two more ‘Calne’ papers imminent – in Radical Statistics Feb 2006, Vol. 90 (CTVB and means-tested benefits distribution) & BJGP 2006, April (CTVB versus GP Out Of Hours workload).

CTVB retrieval could have been improved by manual searching of the VOA website for missing links – electronic searching prone to miss addresses because of slightest spelling or punctuation discrepancies esp. for named properties (our experience has been greater difficulty in locating flats in subdivided properties – i.e. at other end of the CTVB scale).

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No