

COMMISSION FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN ENGLAND

Minutes of the meeting of the Commission held at Scarman House, Warwick Conference Centre, on Friday 7 October 2005 at 2.15pm

Commissioners present: Mr T Redmond (Chairman)
Mr J R White
Ms A Abraham

Also present: Ms A Seex

In attendance: Mr N J Karney
Mr N H Jones
Mr M King
Mr P MacMahon
Mr S D Jones (items 4 & 6)
Mr R K Duveen (item 5)
Mr J Greenwood (item 7)
Mr A L Creech

1. Welcome

Tony Redmond welcomed Anne Seex to her first meeting of the Commission.

2. Matters arising from the minutes of 13 September Commission meeting

The minutes of the 13 September meeting were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by Tony Redmond.

There was one matter arising.

Minute 4: Transitional arrangements: York office

Michael King reported that, during the period leading up to Anne Seex taking up her appointment on 27 October, he had advised York office staff that matters they would normally have referred to Patricia Thomas should be passed to him. He would then take a view on whether to refer this to Jerry White.

3. Commission PIs: September 2005

CLA 1488 had been circulated.

The following points were made:

- The total number of complaints received over the past 12 months had decreased by 3.1%. However, the number of complaints received by the offices continued to fluctuate, and this made forward planning difficult. Complaints received by the London office, for example, decreased by 25.1% in the month of September

compared with a 16% increase in the previous month. Complaints received by Coventry had also decreased in September (10.4%).

- The total number of complaints in hand at 30 September in the London office remained high (1,747), although there had been a slight reduction in the number unallocated more than four weeks (256).
- The York office issued 22 reports since 1 April 2005, compared with 9 in Coventry and 7 in London. Michael King pointed out that a number of York office reports are “on the stocks”, awaiting Anne Seex taking up her appointment.

4. Budgetary control report: 31 August 2005

CLA 1489 had been circulated. Stephen Jones said that the re-formatted report was still under development, and he would welcome suggestions from the Commission on how it might be further refined. The Commission agreed that the report was an improvement over the previous layout in terms of clarity and presentation; the addition of comments of the relevant Deputy was particularly useful.

The following points were made/noted:

- Tony Redmond commented that further work is needed on the final “anticipated full year” column, to give a more accurate/realistic picture of the projected end year position.
- Anne Seex suggested that the term “negative amounts” be amended to “adverse amounts”.
- The variance against the publicity budget was attributable to the Staff Event. Tony Redmond explained that this was the planned utilisation of reserves set aside for this purpose.
- Nigel Karney pointed out that the costs of the three Advice Call advisers are split between the three teams.

5. Business case for replacing Comtrac

Ricky Duveen gave a presentation to the Commission on the business case for replacing Comtrac (annexed), in which he highlighted:

- The results of the consultant CAS Ltd’s five year review of the Commission’s business processes, and an assessment of how well Comtrac currently meets them.
- The deficiencies in Comtrac highlighted by the CAS report.
- An analysis of the Commission’s new business needs which have arisen since 2000, with which Comtrac has not kept pace (it needs to do more than just track complaints).

- The implications/costs over five years of the three available development options:
 - A. Do nothing – £293,000
 - B. Update Comtrac and develop a bespoke solution – £1.1m
 - C. Buy a tailored package to replace Comtrac – £709,000
- The recommended option C had been included in the business case, together with an analysis of the risks involved in the project.

The following key points were made by the Commission in the discussion following Ricky Duveen’s presentation:

- The presentation of a business case was an ODPM requirement for a major project, and formed part of the process of bidding for funds for the project. A detailed project specification/evaluation exercise would need to be undertaken if and when funding had been awarded.
- The Comtrac replacement project included a six month procurement process. However, it was noted that OPHSO had recently introduced its own tailored computer system, based on the Visual Files computer package, following a rigorous and detailed public procurement process involving extensive staff consultation. Ann Abraham explained that the Visual Files system was used by a number of large Government Departments eg Treasury Solicitors. While recognising that there are differences in the two organisations’ business processes, the Commission therefore considered that it would be worth exploring whether it would be possible for the Commission to avoid the time and cost of a separate procurement exercise by adopting OPHSO’s chosen system. However, this should not be at the expense of the Commission finding a solution which best suited its own particular business needs and finances.

The Commission **AGREED:**

- i To endorse the business case for replacing Comtrac, for submission to the ODPM as part of the 2006/07 grant bid.
- ii That Nigel Karney and Ricky Duveen will explore the advantages/disadvantages of the Commission undertaking a separate procurement exercise, in the light of the work OPHSO has done to implement its new computer system, and report back to the Commission when the funding position is clear and the project is in a position to proceed.

NJK; RKD

6. Draft Estimates 2006/07: Corporate Plan 2006/09

The LGA’s letter of 5 October, setting out their comments on the Commission’s draft Estimates and draft Corporate Plan, was tabled. The Corporate Plan had also been discussed at the annual meeting with SOLACE and ACSeS, and at presentations in each of the offices.

The Commission considered whether to revise the draft Estimates and planning assumptions in the light of the LGA's comments, and in the light of the latest available complaints statistics.

The Commission **AGREED:**

- i. Not to revise the planning assumptions and to advise the ODPM that the draft Estimates should be considered as the Commission's final submission.
- ii. To authorise the Chairman to agree minor changes to the plan in the light of comments from local government bodies and staff.

NJK; SDJ

7. Health and safety in graveyards

CLA 1490 had been circulated. Introducing the consultation draft of the Special Report, Jerry White and the Coventry investigator John Greenwood summarised the background and said that:

- There appeared to be little prospect of local authorities receiving advice/guidance from Government Departments/the Health and Safety Executive.
- It was therefore likely that local authorities would welcome guidance from the LGOs on this difficult/sensitive topic (this view was endorsed by Anne Seex).
- The draft Report drew on the LGO's specific experience of considering complaints about this issue; the advice could have covered other points for local authorities, but these would not have been based on LGO's investigations and so had not been included.
- This was the first Special Report to contain photographs: these may not be the ones that will appear in the final Report, since more are being obtained.
- If the Commission raised substantive issues on the draft Report which required further discussion, Jerry White would bring the revised draft back to the November or December Commission meetings. The aim would be to issue the consultation draft by the end of December 2005.

In the discussion, Tony Redmond and Ann Abraham confirmed that they were broadly content with the draft Report. However, Anne Seex commented that she thought parts of the Report did not give sufficient weight to the position of local authorities, in particular their fiduciary duties; she suggested that this should be given greater emphasis so as to balance this against references in the Report to the outrage/public sensitivities involved. Jerry White said that he would consider this with John Greenwood, and make changes to the text which he would send to Anne Seex for comment and if necessary discussion after she takes up her appointment. Tony Redmond and Ann Abraham thought that the changes necessary to accommodate Anne Seex's point may not be significant, which was generally agreed by the meeting.

JRW; JG

The Commission went on to consider the list of proposed consultees for the draft Report, which had been tabled. The Commission **AGREED** the list of consultees, subject to the addition of SOLACE; the Institute of Environmental Health; English Heritage and the Historic Churches Preservation Society.

JRW; JG

Finally, the Commission considered when to publish the Report so as to achieve the greatest possible impact in the media. John Greenwood said that the last Association of Burial Associations' annual conference had been held in May 2005, and assuming this takes place in May 2006 he suggested that publication around that date would help generate media interest. The Commission **AGREED** with this suggestion, subject to John Greenwood obtaining further details.

JG

8. 2006 meetings programme

The following dates for Commission meetings in 2006 were agreed:

10 January, 14 February, 14 March, 11 April, 9 May, 6 June, 11 July, 8 August, 12 September, 10 October, 14 November, 12 December.

**9. Date of next meeting
11.00am, 8 November in MBT.**