

## COMMISSION FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN ENGLAND

### Minutes of the meeting of the Commission held at Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4QP on Wednesday 10 May 2006 at 11.00am

**Present:** Mr T Redmond (Chairman)  
Mr J R White (Vice Chairman)  
Ms A Seex

**In attendance:** Mr N J Karney  
Mr M King  
Ms K Dowse  
Ms J Feeney  
Ms M L Handley (items 5, 7 & 8)  
Mr A L Creech

#### 1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Ann Abraham and Peter MacMahon.

#### 2. Matters arising from the minutes of 14 March Commission meeting

The minutes of the 14 March meeting were confirmed as an accurate record, and signed by Tony Redmond.

There were three matters arising from the minutes.

##### Minute 2: Special Reports

Jerry White said that the joint England and Wales *Memorial Safety in Graveyards* Special Report had received a lot of publicity locally, most of it favourable, and he had been invited to speak about the issue at forthcoming specialist conferences. Also, a number of local authorities had contacted him, referring to surveys of cemeteries they were in the process of undertaking that were likely to result in laying flat a number of gravestones; he had shared this correspondence with Adam Peat, the PSO for Wales. Jerry White explained that he had advised local authorities that, provided they considered all the options and the decision to lay down gravestones was taken at a very senior level, it was unlikely that they would be criticised by the LGO. This advice was endorsed by the other LGOs. In discussion, it was **AGREED** that the LGOs would share with each other correspondence they received from local authorities on this issue. Jerry White added that the author of the Special Report, John Greenwood, would be happy to assist offices with queries about specific complaints if they would find this helpful.

LGOs

The Commission then considered how to increase the awareness and knowledge of Special Reports amongst staff, particularly to ensure that their consideration of complaints was consistent with the advice in the Reports. Simply drawing the attention of staff to copies on the website/intranet was insufficient. The Commission noted that the *Neighbour Nuisance and Anti-social behaviour* Special Report had been presented to staff in each of the offices, and this had been effective/well received. Also, that the interchange between offices on complaints relevant to the topic of the Special Report can be fruitful. The Commission **AGREED** that there should be clear arrangements for communicating the contents to investigative staff when Special Reports are produced.

JF

Tony Redmond said that the consultation draft of the *Partnerships* Special Report was nearing completion, and he hoped that the first draft would be circulated to Commissioners the following week. Ann Abraham's input would be very important, because of the health/social services aspects of the Report.

PM

#### **Minute 5: Budgets 2006/07, 2007/08**

Tony Redmond said that the indications were that the 2005/6 outturn would be almost exactly in line with the revised estimates.

#### **Minute 9: Sayers Vincent Report on Efficiency**

Tony Redmond reported that he and Chris Swinson had arranged to meet Sayers Vincent and PKF to review their work.

TR; CS

### **3. Commission Pls: April 2006**

CLA 1530 had been circulated. The following points were noted/agreed:

- The number of complaints received in the past 12 months (18,325) had decreased by 1.7% compared with the previous 12 months. The decreasing trend was now evident in all of the offices, rather than in one or two as had previously been the case.
- Complaints received by the York office in the month of April had decreased by 27.5%, although this was compared with a very high figure in the previous year.
- Education complaints had increased by 22.4% in the past 12 months compared with the previous 12 months, whereas Housing Benefit complaints had decreased by 20.5%. Planning complaints, which had been steadily increasing, now appeared to have reached a plateau.
- The number of complaints decided was below the 2006/07 targets in each of the offices. Nigel Karney pointed out that, unlike in previous years, the 2006/07 decisions output target approved by the Commission had been split equally between the offices as the output performance was now more consistent between offices.
- Given the decreasing trend in complaints, the opportunity should be taken to make further inroads into older cases.
- Anne Seex commented that her monitoring of comeback files had led her to conclude that improvements could be made to the way in which complaints which are not immediately allocated to investigators are managed, and this could be an issue for other offices.

### **4. Procurement of a replacement of Comtrac and related new systems**

CLA 1531 had been circulated. Nigel Karney introduced the paper, which was seeking the Commission's formal agreement to proceed with the procurement of a replacement for Comtrac and a related eDRM system (Comtrac 2), and the development of the LGO intranet and website. This was in the light of the presentation following the April

management conference on the proposed approach to Knowledge Management, which had been embodied in the draft Requirement and earlier business case.

Tony Redmond pointed out that total expenditure on the Comtrac Replacement Project and the intranet/website redesign, together with the fitting out costs of improving the Coventry office's air conditioning, would use up about three-quarters of the 2006/07 cash reserves. This would result in a tight budget which could place the Commission in a more difficult financial position in the coming years.

Anne Seex said that she would welcome the opportunity to understand more about the overall approach being proposed for the website redesign, and in particular what this would be seeking to achieve in communication terms. This was supported by the other LGOs. Nigel Karney suggested that this would be done in the form of another presentation at a suitable opportunity.

The Commission **AGREED** to:

- i. authorise the Comtrac Replacement Project to proceed with a budget of £450,000.
- ii. authorise the redesign of the websites to proceed with a budget of £65,000.
- iii. that a presentation be made to Commissioners and Deputies on the proposals and proposed approach being taken to the website redesign.

**NJK; RKD; JF**

## **5. Investors in People**

CLA 1532 had been circulated, which attached (for Commissioners and Deputies only) a copy of the paper highlighting some common themes across the Commission from the assessments, which had been discussed at the April management conference. The Commission considered what actions to take in the light of the assessments for the three offices.

In discussion, the Commission endorsed the point made in the paper that the aim of the assessments was to set a benchmark to measure future progress towards achieving the Standard. Michael King reported that he had arranged a special Awayday for the York management team to consider the actions necessary to achieve the Standard.

The Commission **AGREED** to take the following actions:

- i to make available to all Commission staff the assessment reports, together with a covering note from the Commission which:
  - Recognised that we have some challenges to face in achieving the Standard and this was not unexpected, but that the Commission was committed to achieving it.
  - Stressed the relevance of Investors in People for the Public Value agenda, and customer focus in particular.
  - Stressed that achieving the Standard was something which had to involve staff at all levels.

The covering note would be approved and issued by all three LGOs.

**NJK:MLH**

ii The Deputies would develop, for approval by the Commission, an action plan to address the common areas which need a Commission-wide approach (Nigel Karney would lead this process).

**NJK; MLH**

iii Each Deputy Ombudsman, in discussion with their LGO, would develop a local plan to support the Commission-wide approach and to address other specifically local issues: this would be approved by the local management teams.

**DOs**

iv Staff would be involved in developing the Commission-wide and local plans. Initially this would be done in focus group discussions of interested staff in each office. But, as the plans emerged, there might be a role for local 'champions' to help with communication and feedback, and possibly specific local activity.

**NJK; MLH**

v To aim for a further reassessment of the teams in nine to 12 months' time, depending on progress with the action plans.

**NJK;MLH**

## **6. FOIA: March 2006**

CLA 1533 had been circulated. The following points were noted in the report:

- London had fewer full refusals than the other offices during the 2005 calendar year, but more partial refusals. Nigel Karney explained that this may be due to differences in how the figures are recorded rather than actual differences with the other offices (eg partial refusals). This would be covered by the FOIA seminars for staff that would take place once the FOIA guidance had been updated in the light of Bevan Brittan's advice on the Environmental Regulations. Anne Seex pointed out that she had circulated her informal paper on FOIA to the other Ombudsmen, and they need to discuss this in advance of the seminars.

**LGOs**

- York (and Coventry) refused more requests than London, yet York received fewer complaints than the other offices.
- Nine requests had not met the 20 day deadline during 2005.
- Add an additional column to the table to report what happens after the FOIA complaint has been made.

**HJP**

## **7. Sickness absence; March 2006**

CLA 1534 had been circulated. Margaret Handley said that the covering note had been prepared at the request of the Commission at its March meeting: she would welcome guidance from the Commission outside the meeting on how this might be refined.

The Commission noted that 30 staff had hit the triggers in the policy for managing sickness, but there had only been six meetings with managers. Managers had written to explain that this was not needed because of the circumstances of the sickness absence. The Commission recognised that there was often informal contact between the manager and the member of staff off sick, and this was not recorded. But the Commission considered that the meeting was good management practice, and that this should be viewed as a positive means of expressing concern about the member of

staff's welfare, rather than solely as a means of management control. This point should be made clear to line managers.

DEPs; MLH

### **Confidential business**

**1. The review of facilities management and proposal for a centralised switchboard service (exempt from FOIA under S36)**

CLA 1535 had been circulated to Commissioners and Deputies. The Commission had a confidential discussion about the results of the consultation exercise.

**2. Superannuation benefits: retired Local Commissioners (exempt from FOIA under S40)**

CLA 1536 had been circulated to Commissioners and Deputies. The Commission **AGREED** to note the seventh annual report on the superannuation position of retired Local Commissioners.

**8. 2006/07 Commission meetings**

CLA 1537 had been circulated.

The Commission **AGREED**, subject to confirming these decisions with Ann Abraham, who was not present:

- i to cancel the next Commission meeting scheduled for 6 June and use the diary slot for a LGOs/Deputies meeting.
- ii the Chairman to consider how best to deal with items scheduled for the 6 June Commission meeting outside the meeting.
- iii to reduce, with effect from January 2007, the frequency of Commission meetings from four to six weeks, subject to dates being identified which do not conflict with existing diary commitments.

TR; ALC

**9. Date of next meeting  
11.00am, 11 July 2006.**