

COMMISSION FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN ENGLAND

Minutes of the meeting of the Commission held at Millbank Tower, Millbank,
London SW1P 4QP in the 15th floor Boardroom on Tuesday 27 March 2007 at 12.30pm

- Present:** Mr T Redmond (Chairman)
Mr J R White (Vice Chairman)
Ms A Seex
Ms A Abraham
- In attendance:** Mr C Swinson (Audit Committee Chair)
Mr N Hobbs
Mr N H Jones
Mr N J Karney
Mr M King
Mr P MacMahon
Mr D Plummer (items 2 & 10)
Ms J Feeney
Ms S Ruckwood
Mr A L Creech

1. Matters arising from the minutes of 13 February Commission meeting

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

There were two matters arising from the minutes.

Minute 1: Customer satisfaction study 2007

Nigel Karney reported that he had received a proposal from Mori made under a public sector framework agreement to undertake the study; this would be the subject of further discussions but was likely to be accepted. Mori had confirmed that the target completion date of September 2007 was achievable. This was noted by the Commission.

Minute 6 (ii): Changes to LGO areas

Jerry White proposed that, in order to assist the York office deal with the backlog he would not proceed to transfer complaints about Lancaster CC to Anne Seex from 1 April 2007. This change was **AGREED** by the Commission.

2. Commission Pls: February 2007

CLA 1578 had been circulated. The following points were noted by the Commission.

- The number of complaints received continued to fluctuate.
- Complaints received by Coventry in the month of February had increased by nearly 40%; this was explained in part by the receipt of around 50 related/multiple new complaints.

The Commission then considered a further progress report on the York office backlog, tabled by Anne Seex and Neil Hobbs.

Anne Seex highlighted the following key points:

- The current backlog figure (as at 26 March, and comprising only those cases which remain unallocated) was 569. At its highest, the backlog had comprised 970 complaints. Although the office was not yet where it wanted to be, the figures showed a steadily improving trend.
- The York stockpile team was proving to be very effective, both in terms of quality and quantity of output, and was working well as a team (including the support staff).
- The York Management Team (YMT) continued to take various measures to ensure a proportionate degree of rigour in enquiries and to maintain quality, as well as encouraging efficiencies such as increased electronic communications with councils.
- To anticipate the retirement of a York AO (Rob Stay) from 31 March, a new temporary AO (Richard Corney) was already in place so as to achieve a smooth handover of work.
- The first tranche of overtime had not had as big an impact on the backlog as anticipated, although the take up amongst investigators had been good. They had adapted well to the task in hand ie taking complaints to the stage of enquiries with councils.
- The YMT was grateful to Coventry for keeping complaints about Lancaster.
- York AOs continued to review regularly with investigators workloads, targets and throughput of decisions.
- The YMT had recently started a bulletin for staff to update them on progress with the backlog.
- It was hoped that a highly productive London investigator would shortly be transferring to the York office.
- The YMT was due to consider the allocation of complaints on a geographical basis, as is the practice in Coventry.
- Monthly progress reports would continue to be submitted to the Commissioners.

Neil Hobbs added that:

- He wished to emphasise to the Commission that the YMT recognised the seriousness of the situation, and was taking steps to eliminate the backlog.
- But it would not be possible to timetable precisely when the backlog would be eliminated because this depended on factors such as how long individual complaints take to decide. He assured the Commission, however, that there would be a month on month reduction, with the aim of eliminating the backlog by the end of 2007.

The Commission made/explored the following points in the discussion:

- Jerry White considered the progress report to be helpful, and suggested that it would be useful for this to include a monthly summary table which would enable the Commission to track movements in key statistics, such as the number of cases in the backlog; the total complaints in hand; and the average caseload per investigator. This was endorsed by Tony Redmond, adding that the summary table should include output details relating to the overtime worked.
- In reply to a question from Ann Abraham, Duncan Plummer explained that the small differences in the number of complaints in the backlog quoted in the progress report arose because reports to produce these figures had been run at different times, and in the interim one or two cases had been recorded on Comtrac as 'decided'.
- Anne Seex explained that one possible reason for the lower than anticipated impact on the backlog of the overtime worked was that, when she assessed the amount of investigator time needed per case, she had not take into account the impact of investigators dealing with older complaints eg resulting in longer discussions with complainants.
- Anne Seex referred the Commission to the York office's proposal for a second tranche of overtime in April/May (details had been set out in the first backlog briefing note considered by the Commission in February). In the discussion, Tony Redmond advised the Commission that, if it gave its approval to this, there would be no need to make a specific adjustment to the 2007/08 budgets because the overtime working would take place very early in the financial year and the matter could be reviewed in the light of performance against budgets later in the year.

The Commission **AGREED** to:

- i note the progress report on the York office backlog.
- ii request that future progress reports include a monthly summary on key statistics, along the lines discussed.
- iii approve the working of a second tranche of overtime in the York office in April/May, at an estimated cost of £12,300, but with no consequential adjustments to the 2007/08 budgets.

AS;NH

3. Budgetary control report: February 2007

A slightly revised version of CLA 1579 was tabled.

Neville Jones drew attention to Severn Trent's undercharge since 1999 in the Coventry office's utility bill; options included a possibility of recovering 40% of the cost from the Coventry tenant.

The Commission noted the control report, including the Deputies' comments.

4. **Supplementary estimate - Hedra**

CLA 1580 had been circulated.

The Commission **AGREED** to endorse the action taken on its behalf by the Chairman in approving the supplementary estimate of £38,790.

5. **Budgets 2007/08**

CLA 1581 had been circulated.

Nigel Karney explained that:

- The 2007/08 budgets had been circulated in draft form to the Commissioners.
- The 2007/08 budgets included areas that had been identified for savings or achieving better value for money (amounting to £110k approx) in order to fund the three-month period of training and trial operation of the AAS leading up to the 1 April 2008 start date.
- The budgets were very tight in some areas, and would need to be very carefully managed by budget holders, with virements through the year where necessary.

In the discussion, Anne Seex queried differences between individual office budgets in *HR consultancy*. Nigel Karney undertook to consider this point further with the HR budget holder and circulate details to her outside the meeting.

NJK;SR

The Commission **AGREED** to approve the 2007/08 budgets.

6. **Health and Safety: Annual report**

CLA 1572 had been circulated.

The Commission considered the annual report on progress made against the Health and Safety objectives set for 2006/7, and other health and safety matters, together with a draft updated Health and Safety Policy appended to the paper.

The following points were raised in the discussion:

- Neville Jones reported that an emergency evacuation exercise would take place in Coventry later that week.
- Anne Seex stressed the importance of conveying the key messages from the Commission's Health and Safety Policy to all staff in an accessible and easy to read format. Nigel Karney explained that all staff receive a separate brochure of material on health and safety matters, but would benefit from regular reminders; he would consider this point further with David Scott, Principal Facilities Manager, who was now in the lead role.

NJK;DS

The Commission **AGREED** to approve:

- i the following Health and Safety objectives proposed by the Deputies for 2007:
 - To monitor the effectiveness of the “IDENTISAFE” system as part of the safe working policy (a sample was viewed by the Commission after the meeting).
 - To review policy, information and procedures for staff driving for business purposes.
 - To review and update induction materials and fire equipment training.
 - To complete all significant health and safety processes for the year as laid down in the Health and Safety Policy.
- ii the draft revised Health and Safety Policy.

7. Senior investigator pilot: 2006/07

CLA 1583 had been circulated.

The Commission considered the Deputies’ recommendation, on the evidence available from the monitoring group’s review of the operation of the first year of the pilot, that it should be continued for a second year.

In discussion, the Commission **AGREED** with the Deputies’ recommendation, and requested that a further review/report should be presented to the Commission in June/July 2008, on the assumption that the second year of the pilot would operate from 1 May 2007.

The Commission then discussed the Deputies’ recommendation that the secondment post of senior investigator should be re-advertised, given that the original opportunity was offered on the basis of one year only. The Commission **AGREED** the Deputies’ recommendation. The Commission did, however, stress that this was in no way a reflection on the performance of the investigators who had carried out the role of senior investigator to date, and it was important that this was communicated to the staff concerned. Ann Abraham commented that in seeking applicants the Deputies should be clear whether providing a development opportunity was one of the criteria for selection.

DEPs;SR

8. Communications Strategy: 2007-10

CLA 1584 had been circulated.

Jackie Feeney explained that this was a high-level three-year Strategy based around three key themes:

- Corporate reputation/credibility
- Managing the customer expectations
- Internal communications/cultural change

Also that, within the Strategy, five detailed sub-strategies and work plans would be developed:

- Corporate branding
- Stakeholder
- Media
- Customer information
- Internal communications

In its consideration of the draft Strategy, the Commission emphasised the importance of the internal communications work plan, as this would provide the means of securing the engagement of all staff in the Commission's public value vision and business goals. Jackie Feeney agreed, and pointed out that this work plan was in an advanced stage of development and was currently with the Deputies.

The Commission **AGREED** to adopt the document as its Communications Strategy for 2007 to 2010.

JF

9. Local authorities training

CLA 1587 had been circulated.

Introducing the draft business plan, Jackie Feeney drew attention to the Commission's approach to charging for local authorities training. She explained that, when the initiative began, the original intention had been for the charges to cover all of the Commission's costs once the delivery model was in place. But this would mean an increase of about 20% for the core course, which in her judgement would be likely to seriously discourage some councils. Her proposal was therefore for an increase in line with inflation for 2007/08.

The Commission's discussion of the plan focused on this issue, and the following points were made:

- The Commission recognised that all local authorities' training budgets were tight, particularly those of the smaller authorities, and it therefore agreed with Jackie Feeney's assessment about the basis on which 2007/08 charges should be increased. Even so, the Commission considered that the courses represented very good value from money, and that it would be reasonable to "round up" the 2007/08 charges.
- The Commission was also mindful of the forthcoming change to its funding method that was amongst the amendments to LGA 1974 that would be implemented by means of the Local Government and Public Health Bill (currently progressing through Parliament). This would mean that the Commission's funding would no longer come from top slicing the local authorities' Revenue Support Grant, but direct from the DCLG (subject to Treasury approval). The Commission considered that it would be appropriate, in the light of this change, to review its approach to charging for training from 2008/09 onwards.
- Chris Swinson commented that the proposed 2007/08 charges did not reflect the 'indirect costs' detailed in the Appendix to the draft plan. While there were valid reasons for doing this, he observed that, if the Commission was an independent organisation, such courses would be charged at a level to cover all its costs.
- The Commission discussed whether to offer courses at a discount to poor performing councils, and concluded that this would not be appropriate. It was noted that, currently, when the LGOs institute special liaison arrangements with local authorities to resolve performance issues, the provision of training courses is raised in the discussions, and this was considered by the Commission to be sufficient.

The Commission **AGREED** to approve the business plan, including the principles of charging for 2007/08, subject to the following:

- i Rounding up the charges for 2007/08: Tony Redmond would agree the exact charges on the Commission's behalf outside the meeting.
- ii Reviewing the basis of charging from 2008/09 onwards in the light of the anticipated changes to the Commission's funding arrangements.

TR;JF

10. Performance management information

CLA 1585 had been circulated. Nigel Karney presented the results of his review of the Commission's performance management information. He drew attention to the valuable contribution Duncan Plummer and Alan Creech had made to the review.

The Commission agreed with the broad thrust of the proposed revisions, while recognising that this was "work in progress" which would be subject to further development/refinement in the light of experience. Ann Abraham agreed and commented that PHSO was in the middle of reviewing its own performance information, which they found benefited from a "continuous improvement" approach.

The following points were raised in the discussion:

- Anne Seex referred to the complaint categories set out in table 3 of the revised monthly PIs; these would need to match the new complaint categories to be implemented from 1 April 2007.
- Neville Jones queried the replacement of "year to date" with "rolling three month" figures in the revised PIs, since this data on this basis was valuable towards the end of the complaints year when making comparisons against business goal assumptions/targets for the year. Nigel Karney would consider this point further.
- Chris Swinson commented on:
 - The value of showing trend information over periods of longer than 12 months, and he suggested that this should feature more prominently in the revised PIs.
 - His experience with other organisations' performance information, which tended to be a "dashboard" approach whereby performance against business plan goals/targets is reported to the senior board in summary form. This had the benefit of focussing attention both on the key points and on the goals/targets themselves.
- Neil Hobbs pointed out that table 1 of the revised monthly PIs would need to be reviewed from 1 April 2008 in the light of the Access and Advice Service.

NJK

After further discussion, the Commission **AGREED** to approve the new reporting formats for monthly and quarterly performance management information, from April 2007 onwards, subject to the following:

Revised monthly PIs

- i Include more graphs/trends over a longer period than 12 months.
- li Add a new front sheet which would highlight issues/trends/management exceptions (this would replace the comment boxes).

Quarterly performance reports

- iii Prepare two models of the June 2007 report, for the Commission's consideration:

Model 1: detailed reports along the lines proposed.

Model 2: a 'dashboard' of key business goal/target performance information.

NJK;DP;ALC

11. Commission forward programme: 2007/08

CLA 1586 had been circulated.

The Commission noted the forward programme.

12. Special leave: 2006

CLA 1588 had been circulated. The Commission noted the annual return showing the reasons for/number of applications for special paid leave, and in particular the large decrease in the number of days allowed in the Coventry office from 46.5 in 2005 to three in 2006. The Commission wondered whether this could be a reporting issue with that office. Sharon Ruckwood would investigate the reasons for this.

SR

13. Sickness absence: December 2006 quarter

CLA 1589 had been circulated. Neville Jones commented that the March 2007 quarter return for the Coventry office would be affected by a member staff on long-term sickness. The Commission noted the analysis.

14. Date of next meeting

11.00 am, Tuesday 15 May in MBT.