

COMMISSION FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN ENGLAND

**Minutes of the meeting of the Commission held at Millbank Tower,
Millbank, London SW1P 4QP in the Board Room, 15th floor on
Tuesday 29 January 2008 at 11.30am**

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

In attendance: Mr N H Jones
Mr N J Karney
Mr M King
Mr P MacMahon
Miss A Whitehorn (item 5)
Ms J Feeney
Ms S Ruckwood
Mr A L Creech

1. Matters arising from the minutes of 11 December Commission meeting

The minutes of the 23 October meeting were confirmed as an accurate record, subject to an amendment to page 2 ("Mick King also referred to the substantial increase in the number of e-mails received (1,015) in the past 12 months"), and signed by Tony Redmond.

There were two matters arising from the minutes.

Minute 1: Freedom of Information: Information Tribunal

Nigel Karney would follow up Ann Abraham's request that the final grounds of the appeal and other relevant papers are shared with his PHSO contact Rebecca Milner; this had not yet been done.

NJK

Minute 5: Customer satisfaction survey 2007

Nigel Karney reported that the Deputies had invited three AOs (one per office) to join them to develop an action plan to address the issues raised by the study. This was noted by the Commission.

2. Commission Pls: December 2007

CLA 1625 had been circulated.

The Commission noted the following points:

Table 1: Advice service: Mick King drew attention to the potential for unmet demand for the LGO service suggested by the advice service statistics, with 70.7% of the 21,564 calls received by the service over the past 12 months from potential complainants. The Commission agreed that the position would need to be carefully monitored.

Tables 2/3: Complaints received: Mick King updated the Commission on his and Anne Seex's researches into possible reasons for the increasing downwards trend in complaints received by the York office (18.7% fewer in the month of December; 10.5% fewer in the past 12 months). Their researches suggested the following contributory factors:

- The transfers out of authorities -Trafford and Tower Hamlets.
- A steady overall decline in categories of complaint, in contrast to rises in some of the categories in London and Coventry eg complaints about parking and council tax.
- Analysis of the number of complaints received by authority revealed that, of the 10 authorities with the biggest decline in LGO complaints, eight had been the focus of LGO activities such as training and specific YMT initiatives. Mick King did however stress that it was too soon to be certain about this factor and that further research would be needed. He had, however, raised this with Theresa Kimble (York Communications project officer) who had noted a similar trend in other local authorities where training had taken place.

Anne Seex added that a further factor was the continuing transfer of council housing stock to registered social landlords by a number of northern authorities; this could help to explain the decline in the number of housing complaints received by York (which had increased in London and Coventry).

The report was noted by the Commission.

Table 4: Complaints workload: Tony Redmond commented that the total number of cases in hand, and allocated and stockpiled had fallen by over 2,000 between 31 December 2006 and 31 December 2007 (5,891 down to 3,855).

3. Commission business goals performance reports: December 2007

CLA 1626 had been circulated. The Commission noted/agreed following points in their consideration of the December performance reports:

Human resources

IIP: Nigel Karney reported on the recent unsuccessful re- accreditation assessment of corporate services, and the assessor's recommendation that the Commission reviews its strategy for working with IIP and considers the option of working on an organisation-wide basis to achieve the Standard, rather than continue with re-assessment of corporate services alone. Nigel Karney pointed out that a number of the issues highlighted by the assessor were already in train, such as developing competencies for more junior corporate services staff, and that the results of the reassessment and the assessor's recommendation would be considered at a meeting of the IIP working group following week, which he would also attend. Nigel Karney also explained that the approach to IIP formed part of the Deputies' budget proposals that were due to be considered by the Commission under the confidential part of the meeting agenda; the performance report was therefore inaccurate on this point (which stated that the budget decision had already been taken not to pursue accreditation for the LGO in 2008/09). This was noted by the Commission.

Table 1: staff in post: this table would be reviewed to include the staffing establishment figure.

SR

Table 3: sickness absence: Sharon Ruckwood explained that the 2007/08 year end performance report would include additional analysis and data, such as the average sickness cost per employee expressed in days (a key local government measure).

Table 4: training and development: in reply to a question from Anne Seex, Sharon Ruckwood pointed out that the Deputy Ombudsmen are provided with a detailed breakdown of committed/actual expenditure against the 2007/08 training budget.

Communications

Table 1: training activity: Jackie Feeney reported that 128 bookings had been taken so far in 2007/08, compared with the 120 target, and that bookings were now being taken for 2008/09. She pointed out that authorities covered by the York office had received more training than those covered by the other offices (see minute two).

Communications strategy: Jackie Feeney pointed out that this had been rearranged into activity by stakeholder, and media coverage now showed the office split.

Key projects summary

This would be amended to reflect Neville Jones's responsibility for the Access and Advice project in place of Mick King.

4. Budgetary control report: December 2007

CLA 1627 had been circulated.

Tony Redmond commented that the report continued to show that the overall financial position in 2007/08 was sound, with the reserves projected to be in the region of £800k at the year end.

Stephen Jones stressed the importance of budget holders continuing to supply finance with detailed and timely information, in particular on overtime, since this would help to ensure accurate financial forecasting.

Anne Seex drew attention to point 2 in Peter MacMahon's commentary on the London office report, concerning expenditure on translation and interpreting, and to recent Government policy announcements on the costs associated with local authority translating services for non-English-speaking minority groups. Nigel Karney commented that these announcements had been taken into account when the approach to translations had recently been reviewed by the Deputies. The majority of expenditure in the Commission's case was translations related to individual complaints, whereas the focus of the Government announcements was on production of printed material.

The budgetary control reports and budget holders' comments were noted by the Commission.

Confidential business

5. Legal work for the Commission (exempt from FOIA under S40, 41, 42)

CLA 1628 had been circulated to Commissioners and Deputies.

The Commission considered/received Anne Whitehorn's sixth annual report on legal work undertaken by her and the three legal firms Beachcroft, Matthew Arnold Baldwin and Bevan Brittan.

Anne Whitehorn would arrange to place on the LGO intranet the Beachcroft *Public Law Newsletter* she had attached to her report.

AW

6. Budgets 2008-11 (exempt from FOIA under S22)

CLA 1629 had been circulated to Commissioners and Deputies. The Commission considered the draft budgets for 2009-11 and the Deputies' proposals for economies to be made during 2008/09 to address the £1m funding shortfall.

The Commission **AGREED** that:

- i The draft 2008/09 budgets, as amended to reflect their discussion, should be issued as soon as possible to staff and their representatives for consultation.
- ii The final 2008/09 budgets, together with the results of the consultation exercise, would be considered/approved at the Commission's next meeting.

[Note: this was the subject of a separate note sent by Tony Redmond to all staff on 30 January.]

7. Date of next meeting

Tuesday 11 March, 12pm in MBT at the rising of the Audit Committee.